FILM QUARTERLY

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POLICE, ADJECTIVE

SHIRIN

THE WHITE RIBBON

A SERIOUS MAN

A SIXTH PART OF THE WORLD

DILLINGER IS DEAD

FILMS OF THE YEAR

Volume 63 Number 4

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THREE TYPES OF NOTHING

***The Ghost Writer* (Roman Polanski)**
***The White Ribbon* (Michael Haneke)**

The Ghost Writer concludes like *Chinatown*: a traffic accident, curious passersby, a mood of fatalism. Private detective Jake Gittes intends to do good in Roman Polanski's 1974 thriller—"I want the big boys that are making the payoffs"—but it all goes wrong. He ushers in the disastrous outcome for his client and her daughter, and what makes it worse is that something similar has happened before ("I was trying to keep someone from being hurt; I ended up making sure that she was hurt"). It is a Promethean doom. Nevertheless, during the modest, unsteady crane shot that finishes *Chinatown*, Gittes remains in the center of the screen as he stumbles away into the night, a sort of hero still. Things have changed since then. Icier characters start to appear in Polanski's work: impassive males on the verge of psychic lockdown, closer to narcolepsy than noir. The apathetic policemen and hotel staff in *Frantic* impede the doctor's desperate hunt for his kidnapped wife. For a while, the orphan in *Oliver Twist* spurns Fagin with an automaton expression of disdain. Then there is *The Pianist*'s introspective musician, traumatized almost to the point of coma.

The unnamed protagonist of *The Ghost Writer* cannot be mistaken for a hero. Skillfully played by Ewan McGregor, he is a burnt-out case. He pitches for the job of improving the memoirs of a bellicose former British prime minister (he says he will ask "questions that that get to the heart of who Adam Lang *is*"), but only looks alert during the meeting when he stares malevolently at the supercilious editor-in-chief. Later he sits in a hotel bar, tipsy and blank-eyed, trying to ignore a creepy stranger. Even condescension sometimes seems to be too much bother. After he has been mugged in the street, he wonders if Lang's staff used him as a "tethered goat" to draw out manuscript thieves. The theory is voiced with such contemptuous irony, however, that the weird sense is conveyed of a character bored by the suspicious speculation required of him. Disengagement is apparent again during a cozy supper with Lang's moaning wife. "I suppose even ghosts must have feelings," she says patronisingly. "We are sensitive spirits," he replies—a perfunctory response that could not be further from the truth. This cipher is just going through the motions, less an anguished specter than a clockwork marionette whose mechanism is running down.

Empty screens
The Ghost Writer. Courtesy of Optimum Releasing.

Polanski flattens his protagonist, turning him "undimensional" (to use a term from Evan Calder Williams's essay on *Dillinger Is Dead*). This amounts to a reversal of the ghosting process. The film's bestseller source, Robert Harris's *The Ghost* (Arrow Books), is narrated in the first person. The writer is surprised when he reads Lang's draft: "*A crock of shit*, Rick had called it. But actually this was worse. Shit, to quote Gore Vidal, has its own integrity. This was a crock of nothing. It was strictly accurate and yet overall it was a lie—it had to be, I thought. No human being could pass through life and feel so little." Inside the memoir's vacuum, there must be a complex personality, and the novel emphasizes the psychological enigma: "Lang looked at me. And, oh, what layers of meaning there were to be read in those glaucous eyes!" What is so eerie about the film's scribbler is his own shallowness. There are no layers—merely a sardonic shell where the semblance of a person might have been.

Contempt
Oliver Twist. © 2005 Oliver Twist Productions LLP. DVD: Pathé Distribution (U.K.).

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Doorway dramaturgy

Bottom left: *Caché*. © 2004 Les Films du Losange, Wega Film, Bavaria Film, BIM Distribuzione. DVD: Artificial Eye (U.K.) Others: *The White Ribbon*. © 2009 X Filme Creative Pool, Wega Film, Les Films du Losange, Lucky Red, ARD Degeto, Bayerischer Rundfunk, Österreichischer Rundfunk Fernsehen, France 3 Cinéma. DVD: Artificial Eye (U.K.).

Frantic also ends with city streets. One of its last images is disconcerting: two trashcans are mechanically emptied into a waste-disposal truck that slowly drives down a Parisian avenue. In Polanski's recent movies, the conventions of thriller heroism have gone out with the trash. At the conclusion of *The Ghost Writer*, the camera suddenly abandons the protagonist. What happens next is uncertain; for all we know, he might have vanished into thin air. But there was nothing much to disappear and the passersby soon move along. Unlike Roman Polanski, they have more on their minds than death.

⁂

From the outset, *The White Ribbon* is a film of painful encounters. The title appears on a black screen and a subtitle is slowly spelled in calligraphy: *Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte* ("A German Children's Story"). After the main technical credits have flashed up in the darkness, the image gradually dissolves to a meadow. A horseman gallops into the foreground before collapsing, felled by a tripwire. There is a stark contrast between the credits' black backdrop and the daylight, the creep of the subtitle's lettering and the animal's swiftness. These antitheses of speed and visibility are not resolved, ending instead with a fall.

The mysteries of Michael Haneke's new film plagued me more than they should have done. Who strung out the tripwire, burned the barn, tortured two boys? I admit that I too became ensnared. I was, for example, troubled by the culmination of the scene in which a boy looks at his mother's corpse laid out before burial. He realizes he is not alone in

the room. "Karli," he murmurs, and walks into the corner. It is just possible to make out another figure wearing a white nightgown, but the person's face is obscured. The incident is perplexing because Karli is the midwife's son and this is the farmer's home. After the publication of the DVD I took a screenshot and adjusted the levels so as to discern an older brother (the one who later discovers their father hanged). I had started reading so closely I was ready to strip an image of its shadows by means of amateur CGI. (I am indebted to D. A. Miller's idea of "Too Close Reading" in "Hitchcock's Hidden Pictures," *Critical Inquiry*, summer 2010.) And after all that there was nothing important to be found in the gloom.

I tried to connect *The White Ribbon* and Haneke's *Caché*. The doorways that often form frames within the frame raise the issue of spectatorship in *The White Ribbon* as video playback does in *Caché*. Furthermore, perpetrators prove unidentifiable in both films. Most interesting to me were links between the two finales. Curtains are drawn by Georges in *Caché* as well as the pastor in *The White Ribbon*; each penultimate shot shows a courtyard viewed from within an outhouse; then the ultimate long, frontal takes, the schoolteacher who narrates *The White Ribbon* tidied away in a corner in something like the inconspicuous way the two teenagers appear at the end of *Caché*. Was there a pattern here—twinned image sequences encompassing repression, a reminder of reality, revived paranoia? Did the fluent, complacent schoolteacher resemble unreliable Georges the talk-show host? But, if so, in what way was the teacher a culprit? The ideas would not take. I was in a hall of mirrors leading nowhere.

Two series of events in *The White Ribbon* seemed to me to run in parallel and imply a calculus of culpability. On three occasions a child opens a door to find a gruesome sight; I matched them to a trio of scenes in which a vindictive adult strikes a youngster, each blow more ferocious than the previous one. I perceived an asymmetry of violence: the adults assault, the children observe. And in the first set of scenarios they bear solitary witness, belying the initial voiceover insinuation of complicity: "If I remember rightly, it seemed odd to me that the children with Klara, instead of scattering after school to their homes, headed together to the outskirts of the village." Actually children from different families are rarely visible in a group. Is it plausible that they could escape custodial vigilance in order to conspire and then go on the rampage? Yet I could not deny the evidence of adolescent malice (particularly the crucified bird).

Winter light

The White Ribbon. © 2009 X Filme Creative Pool, Wega Film, Les Films du Losange, Lucky Red, ARD Degeto, Bayerischer Rundfunk, Österreichischer Rundfunk Fernsehen, France 3 Cinéma. DVD: Artificial Eye (U.K.).

During one unsupervised spell, after the maiming of Karli, nine children eavesdrop outside the schoolroom. Inside, the teacher watches while the steward's daughter is bullied by policemen. When one abruptly opens the door, the furtive listeners are discovered. A stilted conversation ensues; "we wondered if we could help," says the pastor's daughter. Separated by the doorframe, the two factions confound each other's investigation. It is an uneasy stand-off, one more unresolved conflict, and an image of my own unsuccessful hunt for secret meanings.

⁂

The essays on *The White Ribbon* by Garrett Stewart and James S. Williams avoid any such impasse. They propose differing interpretations of the film, but both stress narrative disruption. The "story comes across like hacked diagnostic fragments on a dissecting table," according to Stewart: episodes are strung together without intelligible causality. They signify more as national symbolism than storytelling, "cross-sections of a systemic malady." Williams dwells on sonic breaches, notably one strange occasion when the voiceover is not spoken by the schoolteacher. Again the story's fabric gets torn, letting in uncanny sounds.

The world of *The White Ribbon* is wounded. The horror and darkness are sometimes punctured by dazzling light. Several windows are illuminated with a glare that could belong to an apocalyptic fire that has left nothing outside. Landscape shots devoid of people cause another kind of rupture. One scene is remarkable for its minimalism: a vast empty sky, a field covered in unmarked snow, two skeletal trees. These barren, nullified vistas in *The White Ribbon* situate the village in what Williams calls "an eerily frozen, silent, almost embalmed universe." What should we make of these annihilated, deathly spaces? Do they (as Stewart argues) prefigure war and fascism, or do they rather (as Williams claims) envision resistance to domination and hierarchy? The gravity of these questions is an index of the richness of Michael Haneke's extraordinary film.

Rob White

REMARKS ON METHOD

Legion (Scott Stewart)

This completes three years of the column; it seems like a good time to run the film backward, to retrace the process of composition, more or less: to lay bare the mechanism, as the Russian formalists liked to say, and to make the operations visible *as operations*.

What then is the process, in its seemingly natural development? Attend many theatrical releases; make notes in the dark; patiently hope for correlations to emerge that place two or more films in collusion, or tension, or both; name this relation and endeavor to measure it against the world (as for example how both *Che* and *Quantum of Solace* in different ways figured contemporary political crisis in the Southern Cone). If this last operation yields interesting results, offers non-boring glosses on the world, and/or on that peculiar way of picturing the world known as the movies, proceed to writing (revisiting the relevant films, if possible). If not, start again, anxious eye on the deadline.

The first empirical moment of willy-nilly viewing is, however, narrowed by what's playing nearby, available time, tastes. It is further shaped by the column's mandate, which is more or less laid out in the title: the dialectical relation between pop culture and the real political–economic conditions that are at once artificer and outcome of that culture (rather than simply the cause to culture's effect, the account generally derided as "vulgar Marxism").

This mandate in turn focalizes not only movies seen, but way of looking. It's a set of suppositions about the world: most notably the idea that our economic relations shape the kinds of thoughts the culture thinks, and that ideas are in turn *about* those situations (and endeavor to serve them). One will not meet the critic who lacks some such set of suppositions; the relevant matter is, at what level do these suppositions rest? When they are near the surface, we think of them as programmatic beliefs enforced on the world. When they are deeply buried, we encounter the illusion of "objectivity," which serves to naturalize the quite unnatural circumstances of our lives as if they were common sense. These two positions are of course the two common meanings of the word "ideology"—one for Marx, one for Coca-Cola.

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Here's an example of how the method comes out: *Legion* (2010) is an end times B-movie. God (off-screen) has concluded, not for the first time, that humanity has become too debased, that there is too much "bullshit," and that the slate needs clearing. The archangel Michael (Paul Bettany, reprising his flagellant from *The Da Vinci Code*) disagrees, and dispatches himself to lonely Paradise Falls for a last stand alongside a motley few humans. Gooey carnage ensues, much of it drawn from minor entries in the millennial zombie renaissance. The folks washed up at the diner are irrelevant but for the single and pregnant waitress Charlie (Adrianne Palicki, so exacting in the television version of *Friday Night Lights*, with nary to do here but look dumbfounded and glow with fearsome fecundity). In some vague way her child is the hope of humanity. She had been planning to put it up for adoption, but dot dot dot.

One might easily file under the ever-expanding rubric of apocalyptic cinema, and trot out this column's favorite unattributable chestnut, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism"—a verdict increasingly more specific to our economic moment. But this won't really resolve enough of the details. For all the eschatological chassis, this ideological vehicle travels the ruts of that rickety domestic troika from 2007: *Knocked Up*, *Juno*, and most obviously, *Waitress*. (As a side note, it would be nice to have some empirical data on the percentage of women who actually walk out of abortion clinics, their visits incomplete; in U.S. films, it is the *only* outcome. This is the height of literal unrealism in contemporary cinema: a vanishingly rare occurrence treated not only as a common plot device but as the truth of the human condition.)

Each of those films was in its own way a comedy; *Legion* hasn't a single moment of intentional humor. Regardless, it's a superior disposition-of-the-fetus drama, with one great shot. Near the end, after our ragtag band has been reduced via the traditional horror-flick defile, we get a sudden and absolute reversal of perspective. The desolate diner is seen at a distance and from above, surrounded by a malevolent army on a darkling plain extending into infinite distance. Despite the shot's brevity and shit CGI, it is an unnerving vision. As so often happens, the film's least plausible image is its moment of truth.

It must surely be the vision not of god nor the audience, but of Charlie; this end of the world is her imaginary, a fact

Seeing and not seeing
Legion. Courtesy of Sony Pictures Entertainment.

casually disguised until this moment. The horrific legion is after all there for her, and her sacred spawn. It is an image, one shortly gathers, of the absolute impossibility of adoption. Rationally, she knows it's the right decision. But confronted by the actuality, it is intolerable. Each pustulent humanoid out there wants the baby; all are incorrigibly evil. It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine that someone else could be as good a parent as you would be.

But this swings the pendulum too far in the other direction, toward the kind of individual psychologism we generally eschew: the film's tawdry apocalypticism has its own, more broadly social content. It's reasonably open about *which* corruption, exactly, has doomed the world: the war of all against all that characterizes the hypertrophied and amoral market. Just as Michael is a counterfigure because he takes a moral stand rather than blindly following the imperative from on high, the decrepitly artisanal diner offers a counterfigure to the nightmare of economic end times. It's a last redoubt of human decency within the damnation of the present, not yet given over to the debasement of soulless getting and spending.

So we can understand in full the delusion of Charlie's position: it's the recognition that everybody is possessed by the inhuman spirit of endgame capitalism, so much that they cannot be trusted with the most elemental of human tasks. She can see this clearly—absolutely—about everyone, except herself. And this is an interesting account of the subjective situation in which we, as biological beings and social actors, find ourselves.

But not interesting enough, one worries. There will be a legion of *Legion*s and some will capture better than others the strange situation of knowing/not knowing, seeing/not seeing, that is near the heart of modern life and that cinema is so prodigious at conjuring. What Charlie can't know about herself, we can still be led to recognize. But that would be pitiably simple. What there is to know is that Charlie's blind spot, her inability to see that she too is utterly interpellated, is itself part of the disaster, every bit as much as the demons at the diner's door. And that we must have such blind spots too—though who is to say if they are revealed, or simply filled in, down at the cineplex. Well, this is exactly the problematic of film criticism, and why one endeavors to take it seriously.

Hence the impulse to test the mechanism, to reverse the order of inputs and outputs as a sort of test. To describe this as running the film backward may be a bit of a misdescription, since cultural analysis is already backward: voyaging from the finished object back via analytic inquiry toward the shifting and unstable social predicament out of which the film arose. So we must start were that sequence ends. *Here is our predicament—now what kind of movie should we therefore expect? What would be the content and form, the narrative and way of looking, and everything else that could illuminate what in our current situation escapes from view?*

If these questions were easily answerable, everybody would be an artist. We could deduce the most compelling way to picture things, and get to it. Just as, if we could know exactly what people wanted and how they wanted it, we would all be rich. But instead the contingencies, complexities, and uncertainties pile one on the next, seemingly beyond speculation, much less comprehension.

Still, we do have objective conditions. We are in the midst of the greatest economic crisis in eighty years and it's early yet. More significantly, we find ourselves within the breakdown of "the American century," not just an economic but a political and cultural fact. We suffer near-total uncertainty about how the next epoch will orient itself.

The last great upheaval here in the core already recedes from memory: the cultural and economic shocks of the late 1960s and early 70s that announced, amid a constellation of signs and wonders, the shift from an industrial to a service economy—promised glossily as an "information" economy, which turned out to mean in truth a race into the cloudy empyrean of financial profit-taking even as the productive, laboring sectors guttered. If this move into the final stage of the U.S.-centered world system spun out a great vision, it was perhaps William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, so insistent about the becoming-virtual of life, about the thrill and threat of dematerialization.

Which leaves this column wondering, inevitably, about the fate of the *Neuromancer* film. For a long time it was considered unfilmable because Hollywood's technological development wasn't yet up to the task (the story *Avatar* likes to tell about itself, but far more plausible in this case). Eventually, around the millennium, it was to be directed by Chris Cunningham, best known for music videos of spectral electronic acts, which made a kind of sense; a few years later the film reappeared, inexplicably to be helmed by Joseph Kahn (*Torque*). After years of bruiting and rumors, the movie finally moved to production . . . precisely as economic crisis washed over the studios. Some time last year it lost its lead, Hayden Christensen (probably for the best; he wasn't really born to play Case). Production has been stalled since then.

It may be that Hollywood's inability to bring *Neuromancer* to the screen is itself the truth of the situation, more true than any version of the film could be. The story's displacement of crisis and transformation into science-fictional allegory is too visible: not enough blind spot for our moment's hysterical looking-via-looking away. But more pungently, it's endlessly telling that the film should founder in this exact moment: when the very developments it required—that is, the dematerializing and virtualizing of the physical movie set, of the scene of real labor—have blown up the economy and worse, pushing us toward another transformation, a far greater crisis. This is dialectical history in its most refined form.

What films *can* get made, then, that might grasp the contours of this elusive situation? No doubt the best will be brilliantly unforeseeable. Nonetheless, it behooves us to make some wagers—to lay out this column's basic project and attunement for the next three years.

Transformation will be the keyword. Economics will be more than ever the master code. At the same time, movies will exercise their own existential panic, inasmuch as they are the art form entirely indexed to an empire heading downward to darkness on extended credit. Here are five propositions.

First: apocalypse will leap from the conventions of the zombie horde, initially into other apparitions and then, seeking to universalize itself thematically, into more and more genres.

Second: the narrative contents of tragedy and comedy respectively should no longer be understood as death and marriage, but systemic breakdown and reassembly.

Third: films that are explicitly about film must be understood in the first instance as meditations on the situation of the real global empire to which cinema belongs—*metacinematic* now means *about U.S. hegemony*.

Fourth: as a consequence, Hollywood's cinematic form is now compelled to be a study of imperial form.

Fifth: Hollywood will look increasingly to the past, not because of some vague sense that there are no new ideas, nor even from simple escapism (though this will present itself as well)—but because it is there that one finds catastrophes that have already been survived.

Will the shards be found there to assemble some image of a future beyond total collapse or narcotic retrenchment? This question remains before us.

JOSHUA CLOVER is the author of *1989: Bob Dylan Didn't Have This to Sing About* (University of California Press, 2009).

PATHWAYS AND DETOURS

Like You Know It All **(Hong Sang-soo)**
Mid-August Lunch **(Gianni di Gregorio)**
Lourdes **(Jessica Hausner)**

Hong Sang-soo is a South Korean filmmaker whose latest film, *Like You Know It All*, turned up recently at the Film Society of Lincoln Center. I knew nothing about him and therefore turned up to see what lay behind the uninformative English title. The principal fictional events are two small offbeat film festivals whose filmmakers and attendees often become involved in peculiar arguments, ridiculous assertions, heavy drinking, and sex. I've never attended any film festival remotely like Hong's depiction, but then I've never been to South Korea. In any case, much of the film is sheer unrealistic fun.

Most of the people at the two festivals are in frequent circulation as groups form, divide, disappear, reappear. I often found myself starting to smile at an incipient comic event that suddenly evolved into a different one and required a new smile. For much of the running time I played catch-up. In short, Hong's idea of continuity is often a series of swift changes of mind. For example, after the first day's sessions are over a festival attendee invites one of the main filmmakers involved, Ku by name, to his home. As they arrive, Ku mutters that the attendee said his home was nearby but it's taken forty minutes to get there. No swift change of mind in that. But shortly after meeting the attendee's wife Ku says something that suddenly fires her up against him almost to the point of murder. Such turnabouts are quite common, though not all are so extreme.

As the film eventually seems to be settling down to an ending it shifts gears. Ku visits a middle-aged film professor who has a younger wife. The conversation is neither wild nor comic. When the professor leaves for some purpose, Ku and the wife have sex. She explains that she loves and esteems her husband. Some "henchmen" of the professor arrive and keep an eye on Ku and the wife, but when they contact the professor by cellphone he tells them to leave the two alone. After this mysterious intervention the film slowly—and to my mind belatedly—ends.

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Unruly elders
Mid-August Lunch. © 2008 Archimede srl. DVD: Artificial Eye (U.K.).

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While the previous film deals mainly with irresponsible young people, *Mid-August Lunch*, an Italian comedy, focuses on four irresponsible ninety-year-olds. One lives in a Rome apartment with her unmarried son, who is pressured by his landlord, doctor, and a friend to take in their elderly female homebodies while they themselves are off enjoying a midsummer holiday weekend. The son is played by writer–director Gianni di Gregorio, whose previous work as a screenwriter was the Neapolitan crime saga *Gomorrah*.

Most of the humor comes from the women's flouting the rules that their husbands instructed di Gregorio's character to impose. Though the film is in most ways a routine farce, the women play it with skill and no attempt to glamorize themselves. What's more, the film has one of the most appropriate and enjoyable music scores (by cellist Stefano Ratchev and guitarist Mattio Caratello) that I've heard in some time. This is colorful foreground music, bursting in con brio.

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An odd thing happened to me after I sat down to watch *Lourdes* . . .

I'd read no review of the film or any details about it and assumed that it was a documentary. One doesn't usually go to Lourdes to make a thriller or a musical, and Jessica Hausner's film began and continued for a long time with the look of a realism that shows not only the crowds of visitors, the outsides and insides of famous buildings, but also digs deeper into the lives of people who go there.

The film begins with a high-angle view over a dining hall where long-term visitors in hopes of a medical or magical cure are each accompanied by their assigned nurse. After the meal

Searching for a miracle
Lourdes. Courtesy of Palisades Tartan.

the camera follows Christine, a youngish blond woman in a wheelchair as her nurse pushes her to a bedroom area. The woman is seen to be almost completely paralyzed and has to be prepared for and placed into her bed. It occurred to me at this point that the paralyzed visitor was remarkably willing to volunteer for such a privacy-invading role. After more scenes involving the visitor I finally realized that although the crowds around her were genuine, she herself had to be an actress playing the role of a paralyzed visitor. One of the main achievements of French actress Sylvie Testud and Austrian director Hausner was to make Christine blend in so convincingly.

As someone who has seen Lourdes only from the outside I was fascinated to have this close and often inside view of its daily life, free from any direct attempt to sell it. The area is a mixture of fine churches, chapels, grottos, springs, rock formations, business-like buildings, restaurants and bars, along with people ranging from the varied staff to tourists, pilgrims, and cure seekers. Hausner and her crew capture that variety without losing track of her theme or weakening it. Often Testud had to wait immobile in her wheelchair beside passing crowds while Hausner prepared the next setup.

The odds of obtaining a permanent cure at Lourdes are small. From the first claimed cures in the early 1800s through today (along with advances in medical supervision and knowledge) the church authorities and their medical board have recognized fewer than seventy cures as genuine and permanent out of the millions who have tried.

Back to Christine. One early morning she finds herself able to get out of bed by herself and walk downstairs. This sets off an immediate series of actions and reactions, the most important one being that Lourdes' own medical department, independently of the church officials, must examine Christine thoroughly enough to determine whether her recovery is genuine and permanent.

At this point the film shifts gear somewhat confusingly. With the help of staff members she knows well, Christine arranges to hold a celebratory picnic on a nearby hill. As the group settles down an elderly woman appears in the near distance struggling to join them. She has appeared before, but it hadn't been clear to me that she was a lonely regular at Lourdes who had attached herself to Christine. She now seems lonely and rejected again.

As the picnic continues, with staff members singing and dancing and the sky turning darker, Christine begins to stumble. At once she decides she has had no sudden cure, just a short break.

Hausner deftly leaves the viewer to decide what kind of ending that is for Christine—in a range from harsh disappointment to relief that her life goes on its familiar way, including the sharp mixture of both.

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STUDENTS OF GENRE

***Camino* (Javier Fesser)**
***The Boarding School* (Antena 3)**

The distinctive Spanish tradition of horror, going back to *The Spirit of the Beehive*, is shown most recently by the huge success of *Pan's Labyrinth* in 2006, made by a Mexican but squarely set in Spain. This tradition is continuing, as evidenced by *[Rec]* and its sequel, box-office-friendly zombie movies set in a quarantined Barcelona apartment building. The pair received their first showing as a double bill in December 2009 at Spanish Cinema Now, the annual round-up at New York's Film Society of Lincoln Center.

Despite some successful exports, though, terrific work remains unknown in the U.S. A case in point is *Camino*, the 2009 Goya-winner by Javier Fesser, a serious drama which has genre elements. *Camino* is based on real-life cases of teenage cancer victims who wound up as candidates for beatification. Fesser's film follows its young heroine from a black-clad pupil at a local Catholic school to a shaven-headed and martyred victim at a sterile white hospital, accompanied all the while by the frigid mother who thanks God for the "gift" of her daughter's illness.

It is not hard to see why *Camino* was viewed in Spain as a political statement: the film's family belong to the Opus Dei, the lay Catholic organization known for their practice of mortification of the flesh. Online videos (www.opusdei.es) celebrating real martyred teens run parallel to Fesser's fictional feature. One forty-minute biopic starts ghoulishly with the disinterment of a holy child's body before focusing (as in *Camino*) on the pathetic home movies of the unwitting victim. But beyond this genre of lives of the saints, traditional in Spain, *Camino* boasts a dynamic plot with a twist in its tail: the Jesus the sick girl pines for is not the Savior, as her mother and priests believe, but a cute classmate ("Jesús" is a common name in Spain). Meticulous mise-en-scène and expert visual effects bring to dazzling life the young girl's Disney-esque fantasies and horrific nightmares. At *Camino*'s climax, Fesser crosscuts between the martyred death of the holy child and a chaotic performance of *Cinderella* at her school. Musical comedy and body horror are fused together in a queasy mix of *Glee* and *CSI*.

Significantly, Fesser is also a pioneer of web-based production and distribution. *Javi y Lucy* (available on Google Video) is a series of mock home movies which always end with a small child, menaced by a train or truck, being kicked out of frame by a little old lady. By 2000 the series had garnered two million hits. Fesser has also curated a festival of shorts (www.notodofilmfest.com), whose seventh annual edition showcased a thousand films in 2009.

In spite of its success in Spain, *Camino* has received limited distribution abroad, with no theatrical release in the U.S. or U.K. to date. The suspicion that the theme means more to local audiences is confirmed by *The Boarding School* (*El internado*), a TV series that shares *Camino*'s themes of youngsters in peril and paranoid conspiracy. Beginning in 2007, the top-rated series, which typically has earned a 21.4 share and almost four million viewers, is now entering its final season. *The Boarding School*'s allegiance to horror is plainly signaled by the name of its single location, an unfeasibly isolated school called The Black Lagoon. Also like *Camino*, the show turns around tortured teen bodies. The young actors

Martyrology
Camino. © 2008 Mediaproducción S.L., Películas Pendelton S.A. DVD: Cameo Media (Spain).

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School of horrors
El Internado. © 2007 Antena 3 Televisión S.A. DVD: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment (Spain).

even complained in interview about the shooting of the series' stylish promos, in which they were repeatedly drenched with rain.

The Boarding School boasts a prestige veteran cast: steely housekeeper Amparo Baró has been a star of stage and screen for over fifty years. But the main attraction is the young ensemble, in and out of their fetching blue uniforms, who used the TV show as a springboard to more sexually explicit feature films with titles like *Sex, Lies, and Party* (*Mentiras y gordas*), one of the biggest box-office hits of 2009. *The Boarding School* also boasts an expert art design with a large set of 1200 square meters and frequent exterior shots in the gloomy forest whose mysterious denizens threaten the pupils. The disturbing premise of the first season was a quest for murdered orphans. And in successive years conspiracy theories have involved neo-Nazis, explosions, and deadly viruses.

Beyond these showy plotlines, *The Boarding School*'s industrial context is unique. Globomedia, Spain's most reputed independent producer, signed an exclusive production agreement with Antena 3, the highest-rated national network, a development said to result from increased competition for quality scripted content in a country which now has no fewer than six free-to-air national channels. One of the first Spanish series to be shot in HD, *The Boarding School* also benefited from expert brand extension. For the first time in Spain, complete episodes were posted on the Internet days after the first broadcast. Next came spin-off TV specials and a fully fledged cross-media platform: a mobile-phone videogame (later relaunched on Nintendo DS), an alternate reality game in association with Coca-Cola which attracted 850,000 page-views, and, for more literate fans, a series of novels. Promotional events have included movie-style premieres in downtown Madrid and a special advance screening of the season finale in the capital's Parque de Atracciones (Fairground) which is located appropriately enough on the edge of a forest. *The Boarding School* is thus a 360-degree brand, rare indeed in Europe and comparable only to the immersive experience of the most creative U.S. series such as *Lost* (to which it bears a passing resemblance).

Like the local tradition of film horror it cites, does *The Boarding School* have specifically Spanish roots? It is hardly unknown for institutions like schools to serve as allegories in national narratives. And it is surely no accident that during the years that groups promoting historical memory have been literally digging up the past (excavating the mass burials of the Civil War), Spain's most popular TV show should revolve around murdered orphans and rotting corpses abandoned in crypts. Feature length catch-up episodes of *The Boarding School* offered a teasing, but richly resonant, tagline: "If you want to know more, first you must remember."

But in spite of these specific circumstances, the series, with its isolated location and unclear periodization, is carefully cut adrift from any real time and place. This has helped *The Boarding School* to be exported to some thirty countries from Eastern Europe to East Asia. France and Russia have optioned the format and Globomedia claims to be in talks with FOX for an American remake. TV fiction, once domestic, can now have a global reach. And if *Camino* is the creation of Javier Fesser, its distinctive multimedia auteur, *The Boarding School*'s counterpart is probably the executive producer, Daniel Écija, the creator of some of Spanish TV's most innovative series over almost twenty years.

It seems possible then that in Spain, and perhaps elsewhere, the balance of power is shifting in cinema from art film to genre movie, thus enabling more intense crossover with television. If *Camino* won best film award at the Goyas in 2009, in 2010 it was the turn of *Cell 211*, a proficient prison drama. Genre films are thus displacing the social realist features that generally win such prizes. But TV is the missing piece in the horror puzzle. *The Boarding School*'s terror-struck teens are the distant cousins of *Camino*'s martyred heroine, and the grandchildren of *The Spirit of the Beehive*'s schoolgirl, fascinated by Frankenstein.

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THE TROUBLE WITH PERFUME

Cinematic makeover
A Single Man. Photo: Eduard Grau/The Weinstein Company 2009.

Christopher Isherwood's 1964 novella *A Single Man* (Vintage Classics) is about the last day in the life of George, a literature professor at a small Californian university. He is bereaved after the death of his partner, Jim, some months before. At lunch George surprises himself by responding to an acquaintance's criticism of the banal uniformity of American motel rooms with an extended defence of utilitarianism. "Until the material plane has been defined and regulated to its proper place, the mind can't ever be truly free," he asserts, railing against the European "world of individual differences, romantic inefficiency, and objects-for-the-sake-of-objects. All that dead old cult of cathedrals and first editions and Paris models and vintage wines . . . The Europeans hate us because we've retired to live inside our advertisements." George runs out of steam shortly afterward, excuses himself, and heads to the parking lot. "From time to time, as he walks," Isherwood writes, "he emits quite loud prolonged farts."

This passage must have seemed like a challenge to Tom Ford, the fashion designer who recently made his feature debut with an adaptation of *A Single Man*. The film, which Ford wrote (building on an earlier screenplay by David Scearce), is very keen on objects for the sake of objects; and its George, played by Colin Firth, is the type to appreciate first editions and vintage wines, not to mention silver cufflinks, classic Mercedes, and Windsor knots. If he's living inside advertisements, they're the kind you'd find in *Vogue* rather than *Reader's Digest*. Perhaps wisely, Ford skips this scene, and, when he shows George walking to his car, we hear no farts. Au contraire: the director has declared (in an interview with *Sight and Sound*'s Roger Clarke) that "I figured out what perfume he was wearing. Creed's Bois du Portugal, invented in 1957—Frank Sinatra's favorite." The film's resemblance to a perfume commercial has been widely noted—in reviews in *The New York Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *A.V. Club*, and others—and the comparison is apt. The sensibility at work here is one that determines to cover up with prettiness the pong of life and, if possible, the stench of death. The latter is, of course, not possible, and the result, though lovely and moving at times, is kitsch.

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A sustained comparison of the novella and the film shows how fastidiously Ford has excised all traces of conspicuous vulgarity. Isherwood's book and character—his free indirect style ensures that the sensibility of the one overlaps with that of the other—acknowledge and embrace the gross, the unruly, and the decaying. Ford's work seems neurotically averse to ugliness or mess of any kind, however base the context: when, following Isherwood, Ford shows George on the toilet, he manages to give the impression that the character's shirt is neatly tucked in, even with his pants around his ankles; and when Ford introduces a genuinely perverse note—a brief fantasy of George pissing on the face of a brat—he lights the splashing stream as you might that of an ornamental fountain.

Isherwood's George dresses smartly compared to his class. "His neat dark clothes, his white dress shirt and tie (the only tie in the room) are uncompromisingly alien from the aggressively virile informality of the young male students . . . They look as if they were ready at any minute to switch from studying to ditch-digging or gang-fighting." As you would expect, Ford was attentive to the sartorial details. He told *Sight and Sound* that "George's clothes, when I had them made, had labels inside them, because I figured out where he would have had them made—labels from the right Savile Row tailor, with the date." Nothing in the book suggests such fastidiousness. The film's students, meanwhile, are ready for the catwalk rather than the ditch. According to Isherwood, the one to whom George grows closest, Kenny, "would be conventionally handsome if he didn't have a beaky nose." Ford's Kenny (Nicholas Hoult) looks burnished in gold—

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Colin Firth and Tom Ford
A Single Man. Photo: Eduard Grau/The Weinstein Company 2009.

"not like any student you ever saw in your life," as Andrew O'Hagan wrote in the London *Evening Standard*, "but like a newly hatched fashion chick in his mohair jumper, eyes much bluer than the scene requires."

Such nips and tucks proliferate. George's old friend Charley, with whom he has a boozy, nostalgic dinner, provides another case in point. She had, Isherwood's George remembers, been "adequately pretty" when young. "Her poor cheeks are swollen and inflamed, now, and her hair, which must once have made a charming blur around her face, is merely untidy. Nevertheless, she hasn't given up. Her dress shows a grotesque kind of gallantry, ill-advised but endearing . . . it only emphasises her lack of shape." The film's production notes described Charley as "a 48-year-old beauty" and, as played by Julianne Moore, she is. ("Mr. Isherwood's Charley was less complex and certainly less attractive," according to Ford, which is certainly half true.) In the *Sight and Sound* interview, Ford explained that he dressed her in the style of a Rudi Gernreich collection not yet made at the time of the film's setting. "Maybe she's his muse," he suggested, "or even if she's not his muse, she knows him, and she's that much ahead of her time. She has the latest this and the latest that—a Serge Gainsbourg record because she spends the summer in the South of France. She's way ahead of everyone." This is not Isherwood's Charley, though it might be something like how she would fantasize about her life. In the book, her home is "a simple rectangular box" up several flights of rickety stairs, "more than somewhat oriental-gift-shop in decor." In the film, it's a smorgasbord of style, incorporating a dash of chinoiserie here and there. As Leslie Felperin wrote in *Variety*, "the way Charley's pink-and-gold parlor harmonizes not just with her sweeping monochrome dress but also her pink Sobranie cigarettes will evoke swoons of delight in auds for whom magazines like *Wallpaper* and *Architectural Digest* are holy writ."

Isherwood describes George and Jim's home as a "tightly planned little house. He often feels protected by its smallness." The stove and bathroom mirror are "small," the stairs and kitchen doorway "too narrow," the living room "low damp [and] dark," the garage "covered with a vast humped growth of ivy, half dead, half alive." When he finds ants parading across the floor and over the sink, George pours boiling water

on them, and feels bad about it. "Life destroying life before an audience of objects—pots and pans, knives and forks, cans and bottles—that have no part in the kingdom of evolution." No ants or ivy for Ford, nothing low, damp, or dark, but a capacious modernist construction, by the architect John Lautner, of rich wood and sheer glass filled with objects, objects, objects. In the director's statement included in the production notes, Ford remarked: "I needed to find a house that I knew I could pull back from and get a beautiful architectural shot to show his entire world." Isherwood wants to make us understand George by putting us in his head; Ford by displaying his possessions, from a distance.

Like Isherwood, Ford appreciates the toned torsos of youth in action or repose, but, unlike Isherwood, he recoils from the average, mortal body. The novel's George goes to a hospital to visit Doris, who, for a brief period, stole Jim from him. She is described as "this yellow shrivelled manikin with its sticks of arms and legs and hollow belly, making angular outlines under the sheet." Ford has no use for her ugly frame or her awkward part in George's story. Instead, he creates Carlos, an outrageously gorgeous Spanish hustler who approaches George outside a supermarket. According to Ford in the production notes, the professor is "mesmerized" by the hustler. "His attraction to him is not sexual: he simply wants to gaze at Carlos's absolute beauty." Such aesthetic swooning is the hallmark of a film whose fetishistic close-ups prettify everything: landscape and kitchen appliances and dilated pupils and pencil sharpeners. George's neighbors are a soft-focus dream of Kennedy-era suburbia, a boy in a gun shop straight out of Norman Rockwell. Even ink spills—even the gouts of blood spilled from a lover's body—fall just so.

Isherwood has a strong sense of immanent beauty; Ford wants everything to look nice. The problem with this superficial aestheticism is that life spoils it. Claudia Puig wrote in *USA Today* that George and Jim (played here by Matthew Goode) "had lived together in deep contentment for 16 years," whose blithe simplicity is true to the spirit of the film but to that of few real-life relationships, and certainly not to the one described by Isherwood, who talks of plentiful quarrels and ruptures. Ford will brook bad behavior only up to a point. A kind of chemistry, for instance, exists between Charley and George, founded on her attraction to him. In the book, when they say goodbye, "she kisses him full on the mouth," which happens in the film. "And suddenly sticks her tongue right in," which seems messy and vulgar—and doesn't. Isherwood's George is profoundly sympathetic partly because he can be dark and nasty in the way that real people can. To the neighborhood kids, he knows he is "a mean old story-book monster . . . waving his arms and roaring like a madman from the window." He entertains megalomaniac fantasies of terrorizing one prominent establishment figure or another: "His children's heads may arrive in cartons by mail, or tapes of the screams his relatives utter as they are tortured to death . . . Rage, resentment, spleen; of such is the vitality of middle age." Ford makes him continent and kind and wise, even when very sad or quite cross—the emotional equivalent of his sartorial elegance and poise.

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Style being the essence of the film, and style being a matter of taste, reviews of the picture varied considerably (universal praise for Firth's central performance notwithstanding). In *Screen International*, Lee Marshall said Ford "gets it spectacularly right first time round," finding the film "both stylistically assured and quietly moving." Michael Phillips suggested in the *Chicago Tribune* that "just about every sequence and flourish and detail . . . feels and looks right." The *A.V. Club*'s Nathan Rabin pronounced it "a poignant meditation on grief, memory, and loss . . . a film of tremendous style wedded to real substance." Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* found that "a sorrowful beauty infuses every frame of this remarkable debut feature." In *Entertainment Weekly*, Owen Glieberman called Ford "a born filmmaker with a rapturous eye." *USA Today*'s Puig called the movie "an aesthetic wonder."

Others tempered appreciation with reservations about hyperstylization. In *The New Yorker*, Anthony Lane jovially noted of an early sequence showing the aftermath of Jim's auto accident that "even the corpse preserves a certain je ne sais quoi." "True, this is a dream sequence, but then the whole movie, with its glazed and polished air, could be a dream," he continued. "Who's in charge here, for heaven's sake—a fashion designer?" Manohla Dargis in the *The New York Times* also thought that "at times [Ford's] taste seems too impeccable, art-directed for a maximum sale." Peter Bradshaw in the *Guardian* suggested it "all but drowns in its own gorgeousness," while the *Independent*'s Anthony Quinn remarked that "the exquisite surface begins to obtrude."

Some felt this tendency didn't just qualify the film's success, but scuppered it. The *Evening Standard*'s O'Hagan judged that "ludicrousness is the movie's hallmark," an exemplar of the deplorable reduction of gay sensibility to "an aspect of commercial thinking and of modern style . . . [George's] drapes look as if they are vacuumed every two hours; his hair looks like it is combed every 10 minutes." In her *Sight and Sound* review, Kate Stables argued that the film's "stiff perfection . . . makes everything around its hero seem set-dressed and stilted." "Little about *A Single Man*

rings true," insisted Sukhdev Sandhu in the *Daily Telegraph*, finding it too "tweezered, styled and glossed." *Salon*'s Stephanie Zacharek thought it "all art and no direction . . . less a finished, fleshed-out movie than it is a mood board." In the *Village Voice*, Scott Foundas spat that the film "flaunts its capital-A Artiness the way some Napoleonic gym rats flaunt their overdeveloped musculature." (It is hard to imagine Ford's George working out, whereas Isherwood's slightly vain protagonist has to put in the hours "toiling in the gym.")

There was also widespread skepticism about a peculiar device Ford deploys, varying the saturation of his images' color depending on the intensity of George's joie de vivre—more color equals more life! A line in the book has something of the same valence. Leaving the supermarket, George calls Charley from a phone box to invite himself over for dinner: "If any of the clerks were watching, they would see his face inside the glass box brighten, flush with joy like a lover's." Ford extends this to the whole image, with the generally desaturated palette blushing more brightly when George catches sight of something lovely: the hustler in the parking lot, Kenny in a bar, a little girl in a bank (the details of whose blue dress seem to inspire as much sensation as her cloying naiveté). It's not a terrible or an ineffectual idea; but it is lazy and kitschy, a consequence of Ford's strategy of avoiding the fecund mess of the real.

There is a narrative equivalent to this formal gimmick. Isherwood's George is sad at times—perhaps even on terms with depression, as when, in the supermarket, he is overcome by nausea and anger. "Damn all food. Damn all life . . . the overpowering sloth of sadness is upon him. The sloth that ends in going to bed and staying there until you develop some disease." But there's no suggestion that he doesn't recognize sadness, like ugliness or decay, as part of a world worth living in. Far from it: "*I am alive*, he says to himself, *I am alive*. And life-energy surges hotly through him, and delight, and appetite. How good to be in a body—even this old beat-up carcass—that still has warm blood and live semen and rich marrow and wholesome flesh!" The difference, we are told, between George and other middle-aged men is that, "in some sense which can't quite be defined but which is immediately apparent when you see him naked, *he hasn't given up*." (These italics are all Isherwood's.)

Ford makes him into "a man who cannot see his future," as he put it in the production notes. The film's George carries a gun around with him all day, puts his affairs in order, leaves instructions on how his corpse is to be dressed, and seeks the least messy way to blow his brains out. (Inside a sleeping bag? In the shower?) He bears with

An elegant man
A Single Man. Photo: Eduard Grau/The Weinstein Company 2009.

gracious equanimity the indignities thrust upon him by the world, and by Ford: Charley's casual belittlement of his and Jim's relationship; his exclusion, in flashback, from Jim's memorial service (the book mentions "his curt *no, thank you*, to the funeral invitation"). That this stoic despair travesties Isherwood's character has not gone wholly unnoticed. Zacharek observed in *Salon* that the film has "an unflattering, simpering self-pity at the heart of it, a quality that isn't present in Isherwood's book." In *Time Out New York*, Keith Uhlich suggested that "Ford's biggest mistake is making George a martyrdom-ready symbol; too many movies subscribe to the regressive notion that queers are unassailable victims of fate and circumstance."

Rather than a portrait of the mind of a man on good terms with the world during his last day in it, then, Ford shows us a man learning his way from despair to those same good terms—or, again in the words of the director's statement, his "coming to terms with the isolation that we all feel, and of the importance of living in the present and understanding that the small things in life are really the big things in life." Whether a close-up of a pencil sharpener is the best way to express this is questionable, but the sentiment is fair enough. The problem is that Ford also retains Isherwood's ending, in which George dies of a heart attack. In the book, this is a fine death, sad, but a harmonious part of a world that contains sadness. In the film, it's bathetic and absurd, like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon into the mouth of a bullfrog. In a final bloom of kitsch, George is welcomed to the afterlife by Jim, dressed exquisitely and smelling, we presume, more like Creed's Bois du Portugal than the grave.

BEN WALTERS writes about film for the *Guardian* and *Sight and Sound*. He is also Cabaret Editor of *Time Out London*.

FILMS OF THE YEAR, 2009

JAMES NAREMORE MAKES HIS SELECTION OF THE YEAR'S BEST U.S. RELEASES

1. *POLICE, ADJECTIVE*

Corneliu Porumboiu's *Police, Adjective*, the story of a law officer who has a guilty conscience about one of his investigations, could be described as an anti-police procedural containing a great deal of grey humor. Even so, many elements of the *policier* are on display. The detective protagonist, Christi (Dragos Buçur), doggedly shadows a suspect, writes daily reports in a battered squad room, gathers evidence from the scene of a crime, stakes out the suspect's house, interviews an informant, searches automotive and criminal records, and so forth. We also see moments of "human interest" typical of police films, showing the detective's domestic life and quotidian activity in the squad room. (One of Christi's colleagues wants to lose weight by joining a group that plays "foot tennis." Like me, you probably don't know what that is, but we later see Christi playing it during off-hours.) The film is more significant for what is missing. No chase scene, no sex, no violence. The setting is Vaslui, a drab Romanian city (Porumboiu's home town) where the streets are half deserted and winter is coming on; the justice system is populated by a feckless, irritable staff and their pompous supervisors; the home life of the newly married detective is troubled; his hard work is completely ignored by the city prosecutor and police chief; and the unseen arrest of the culprit—a teenager with no previous record who will likely spend three years in jail for smoking hash—is little more than a reflexive exercise in bureaucratic authority.

Police, Adjective is also a film about language. The characters discuss the meaning of words and the camera lingers over Christi's handwritten reports of his activity. ("The suspect did not meet anyone, did not use his mobile phone, and smoked a single cigarette, which I checked and which is not relevant to this case.") In the powerful climactic scene we are given a dictionary definition of the title: the adjectival form of "police," we are told, can be used to describe a police officer, a police novel or film involving "mysterious happenings that are resolved in the end by the ingenuity of a police officer or detective," and "police states or regimes which are supported by the police and which exercise control through repressive methods." ("Ridiculous!" the detective's boss declares when he hears the last example. "All states depend upon the police!") Three other terms are defined: "law," "moral" (one meaning of which is "conclusion contained in a text, especially in a fable"), and "conscience."

Porumboiu has said that in the long scenes of Christi's stakeout, which contain the only POV shots of the film, he was thinking of Antonioni's *Blowup* (1966). We watch ordi-

NAREMORE'S FILMS OF 2009

1. *Police, Adjective* (Corneliu Porumboiu)
2. *Shirin* (Abbas Kiarostami)
3. *Tulpan* (Sergey Dvortsevoy)
4. *Henri-Georges Clouzot's Inferno* (Serge Bromberg and Ruxandra Medrea)
5. *35 Shots of Rum* (Claire Denis)
6. *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow)
7. *Sita Sings the Blues* (Nina Paley)
8. *Me and Orson Welles* (Richard Linklater)
9. *Summer Hours* (Olivier Assayas)
10. *Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl* (Manoel de Oliveira)

Honorable mention (alphabetical by director): *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (Wes Anderson), *Goodbye Solo* (Ramin Bahrani), *District 9* (Neill Blomkamp), *Sugar* (Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck), *Bright Star* (Jane Campion), *Ne change rien* (Pedro Costa), *Lorna's Silence* (Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne), *Loren Cass* (Chris Fuller), *Where the Wild Things Are* (Spike Jonze), *The Headless Woman* (Lucrecia Martel), *Seraphine* (Martin Provost), *An Education* (Lone Sherfig), *The Maid* (Sebastian Silva), *The Informant!*/*The Girlfriend Experience* (Steven Soderbergh), *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino), *The Beaches of Agnes* (Agnès Varda).

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Vaslui gumshoe

Police, Adjective. Photo: Marius Panduru. Courtesy of IFC Films.

nary comings and goings, their details too far away to become fetishized, until the virtually empty street and its ambient sounds (the bark of a dog, the squeak of a bicycle, a car engine, the wind, the chirping of birds) take on a blank quality. This is a world in which meaning is imposed upon nothing by the raw authority of the state. At dinner one evening, Christi's wife (Irina Saulescu), a high-school language teacher, patronizingly tells him that he made a spelling mistake in one of the reports he left lying about the house: as of two years ago, the Romanian Academy has decided that "not any" is a "negative pronominal adjective" and should be written as one word. His boss later informs him in the tones of a self-righteous intellectual that "conscience" is an outdated concept; once backed by the authority of the Bible, it now has various interpretations. Today, he points out, what is good or bad is determined by "law," which is written by civil officials. The police have a duty to enforce law, not to follow the vagaries of individual conscience.

The entire film is rendered "objectively," in sequence shots or long takes viewed from a distance and filled with dead time. This style has become a hallmark of contemporary art movies, particularly those of the Romanian new wave, but too little has been written about the different rhythms and moods it can sustain. In the case of *Police, Adjective*, the undramatic, dialogue-less sequences—in which Christi follows suspects on foot, walks down hallways, eats three complete meals, and waits to be admitted to his boss's office—eventually create a wry, humorous effect that Porumboiu has called "absurd time," while also eliciting our admiration for Christi's literal-minded professionalism, simple integrity, and graceful movement. Dragos Buçur, whose performance has no close-ups and only the subtlest changes of posture and expression, usually enters slightly after a scene begins, opening a door or emerging from around a corner, his head slightly bowed, his dark eyes peering ahead like a hunter. His movements were modeled to some extent on Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959), but Buçur also contributes a sad, patient face. He is as important to this film as Delphine Seyrig is to Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), which uses dead time in more painterly fashion and with more disturbing results.

One of the most elaborate and slyly amusing scenes in the film, an eleven-minute sequence shot during which we hear an entire song maddeningly repeated three times, is played almost deadpan. It shows Christi returning home after a long day and engaging in a discussion of language with his wife. The camera is positioned in the foyer of a small apartment, panning occasionally to look into the open doorways of different rooms. The wife, who resents Christi's absences, sits at a computer, making restless movements in a swivel chair and watching a YouTube clip of a Euro-trashy pop tune, its volume turned up full blast: "I won't leave you, love,

Language games
Police, Adjective. Photos: Marius Panduru. Courtesy of IFC Films.

for a moment of illusion. I won't leave your side if you will be with me. What would the sea be without the sun? What would the field be without the flower? What would today be without tomorrow? What would life be without you?" She barely acknowledges Christi, telling him that dinner is in the kitchen. He goes into the tiny kitchen and through the doorframe we watch him solemnly eat the meal. The song comes to an end, starts up again, ends, and starts again. "This food is good," Christi shouts, turning in his chair to take a beer from the refrigerator. He finishes his meal, goes into the living room, slouches on a couch near his wife, toys with a TV remote, and puts his beer atop the computer tower. The wife moves the beer to her desk and continues to watch the screen. "This song doesn't make any sense," Christi says. The wife says she hasn't thought much about the lyrics, which are "like images." She explicates: "'I won't leave you love.' So it's an anaphora, a rhetorical device . . . It tries to define this ideal love by associating it with symbols." "Are they images or symbols?" Christi asks, playing dumb. The wife points out that he has been drinking too much, shuts down the computer, and prepares for bed. Christi goes into the bathroom to brush his teeth. "It's like, 'what would toothpaste be without a toothbrush,'" he says innocently. His wife smirks and shakes her head.

A more important and affectively complex sequence occurs near the end, when Christi and his colleague, a big-bellied, slow-witted fellow with a stone face, are summoned to meet with their chief (Vlad Ivanov, who played the abortionist in Christian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* from 2007). They wait interminably in an outer office where a secretary types documents into a computer. The colleague tries to find a newspaper to read: "I've read *The Times*, I've read *The Journal*; let's see what *The Truth* has to say." Eventually admitted to the chief, the two men sit facing one another at either side of the screen, like schoolchildren meeting with the principal, while their boss sits between them in a slightly elevated position behind his desk. The camera angle barely changes but the mood shifts from comic to sinister. The chief glowers at Christi, tells him he's made a spelling mistake in one of his reports, and quietly orders him to mount a sting operation and arrest the kid he has been following. Christi argues that the boy is a harmless hash-smoker whose so-called friend has "squealed" on him. "Denounced," the chief corrects, and repeats his order. Christi refuses: "I don't want to have that kid on my conscience." The chief asks him to define "conscience" and begins to conduct an elaborate, increasingly humiliating school lesson. First he orders the fat colleague to write Christi's definition on a blackboard ("Conscience is something within me that stops me from doing something bad that afterwards I'd regret") and then has the secretary find a Romanian dictionary. He leans back in pleasure: "Lads, you know what we're doing here? Dialectics!" When at last the dictionary arrives, he orders Christi to look up words and read the definitions aloud (an insert shows the printed pages). "You no longer know what you are," he concludes, and explains that Christi must decide "if you're going to be a police officer and enforce the law or if you're going to follow this moral law of yours and leave the police."

Porumboiu depicts a society barely emerged from autocratic rule—a still Kafkaesque state that subordinates fear of doing harm to others (the dictates of conscience and morality) to fear of transgression and punishment (the dictates of law). But *Police, Adjective* also raises philosophical and ethical issues about modernity in general. Christi, like all of us, is hemmed in by the politics of language, the rule of law, and the government filing system. He suffers from what in English during the Middle Ages was aptly called the "agenbite of inwit" (the modernized spelling is by James Joyce), which might be defined as "the repeated biting of inner knowledge." He must repress this biting if he wishes to remain a dutiful instrument of near-universal bureaucracy.

2. *SHIRIN*

Abbas Kiarostami's films are usually situated on the boundary between fiction and documentary, but his latest, *Shirin*, belongs in a zone somewhere between fiction and museum installation. It consists entirely of close-ups of women sitting in a movie theater as they watch an Iranian popular film. The women are played by 112 of Iran's professional actresses, plus Juliette Binoche, who happened to be working with Kiarostami on another project and was nearby. The film they supposedly watch is a fanciful, sentimental melodrama entitled *Shirin*, based on Nezami Ganjavi's *Khosrow and Shirin*, a celebrated epic poem of the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. But in fact, this film doesn't exist. Kiarostami constructed a "theater" in his living room, directing his actors to react to a spot on the wall behind the camera. Afterward, he invented an off-screen soundtrack made up of formalized dialogue, horses galloping, water splashing, swords clashing, and stirring music by four contemporary Iranian composers. The result is a metafilm of considerable richness, giving us the opportunity to "see" a movie in our minds as we watch the play of emotion across women's faces and become conscious of our own role as cinematic spectators.

For critical insight and useful cultural background on *Shirin*, I recommend a conversation between Jonathan Rosenbaum and Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, published on Rosenbaum's website, jonathanrosenbaum.com. (I also strongly recommend Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum's 2003 book, *Abbas Kiarostami*, published by University of Illinois Press.) My own remarks will be concerned mainly with close-ups and film acting. As we know, Lev Kuleshov theorized that the meaning of facial expressions in close-ups is determined in

Fascinating faces

Shirin. Directed and produced by Abbas Kiarostami 2008. DVD: BFI (U.K.).

the last instance by editing, and his colleague Vsevolod Pudovkin praised actors who could simply think for the camera in "gestureless moments." Kiarostami's film partly confirms such notions: we read the women's faces in relation to the sounds we hear from off-screen; there are no reverse angles, but the post-synchronized soundtrack sutures the close-ups into an imaginary world and motivates the women's reactions. This account, however, is inadequate, in part because the actors perform essential work. Kiarostami surely told them what kind of movie they were watching and directed them to react to its different moods. Significantly, his previous films have made considerable use of nonprofessional actors, whereas here all the players are professional. I very much doubt that *Shirin* could achieve its effects without their ability to convey meaning with minimal resources. To appreciate what they contribute, we might do better to recall Béla Balász's rhapsodic praise of the unique power of silent film close-ups to turn faces into windows to the inner life; the isolated face in movies, he writes, can "radiate a tender human attitude in the contemplation of hidden things," reveal to us "what is really happening under the surface of appearances," and speak to us in "silent soliloquy."

The women of *Shirin* are viewed in standard-sized close-ups that bring their shoulders into view and allow them to use their hands as expressive instruments; they appear to be seated at different places in the auditorium, gazing at the screen from slightly different angles, and are cleverly lit, ostensibly by the soft, flickering light of the screen but also by a subtle backlighting. Each covers her hair and frames her face with a scarf. Some are old and some are young, and they appear to represent slightly different social classes. Some are in a black limbo, others in a position that enables us to see men and women behind them. All have lovely, lived-in faces; indeed one of the pleasures of the film is a growing appreciation of the variety of faces and the empathy that comes from looking at them—a phenomenon that needs a philosopher such as Emmanuel Levinas to fully explore.

One might also enlist the help of the social scientists, ranging from Charles Darwin to Paul Ekman, who have tried to codify facial expressions. The women actors in *Shirin* produce a variety of tiny but eloquent expressive signs keyed to the changing moods of the film they watch. We inevitably assign meanings to some of these signs: pensive concentration, casual relaxation, rapt engagement, tearful identification, concern, fear, and so forth. Occasionally we see a slight smile, a frown, a slow chewing of gum, a surprised widening of the eyes. One woman attentively "reads" the film, her eyes moving back and forth across an imaginary screen. During a violent scene, a woman flinches and looks away and another closes her eyes, lowering her head in a kind of grief. Hands are as important as faces—adjusting a scarf, biting a nail, posing thoughtfully with a finger touching a chin, staving off sobs by covering the mouth with a hand. But these modern performance signs resist neat codification; they belong to the idiolect of performers who suggest "inner" meanings beyond the reach of full articulation. One of the remarkable qualities of the women in *Shirin* is their ability to create the impression of fully embodied persons with emotional lives beyond the movie theater—lives we can sense but never know. The overwhelming emotion they generate is one of sadness over both the film and the world.

Given that *Shirin* is a film about women watching a melodrama, Kiarostami runs the risk of falling into sexist clichés; but it's difficult to watch the film without thinking about the situation of women in Iran. Merhrnaz Saeed-Vafa has pointed out that because all the women wear scarves, they can't be disassociated with the present political and social moment in their country: "When you see these women crying, you can't help but think of martyrdom. At the beginning, we even hear Shirin addressing other women, 'Listen to me, my sisters,' . . . and then at the end, she says to them, 'I'm so tired, my sad sisters,' asking them whether they're crying for her or for their own, inner Shirins." It should also be noted that *Shirin* prevents us from being completely detached observers. As David Bordwell notes on his blog, *Observations on Film Art* (www.davidbordwell.net/blog), this is a film that watches us. *Shirin* makes us aware of our own faces, and in the process enlists us in a human community.

3. *TULPAN*

Sergey Dvortsevoy has surpassed himself in the sweetly comic *Tulpan* (*Tulip*), his first effort at fiction, which bears traces of his work as a fine director of observational and ethnographic documentary. The film centers on Asa (Askhat Kuchinchirekov), a young Kazakh sailor home from the sea who dreams of becoming a shepherd on the oceanic, utterly flat landscape of the Hunger Steppe. Asa lives temporarily in a crowded yurt belonging to his pretty and loving sister Samal (Samal Yeslyamova), her grouchy older husband Ondas (Ondasyn Besikbasov), and her three children. The husband resents Asa and treats him as a callow youth; even if he somehow learns to be a shepherd, he must find a wife before the state will give him a herd of his own, and this seems highly unlikely.

Near the beginning of the film, Asa, Ondas, and Asa's gold-toothed pal Boni (Tulepbergen Baisakalov) attempt to negotiate a marriage between Asa and Tulpan, the daughter

A story of the steppe

Tulpan. © 2008 Pandora Film, Cobra Film, Eurasia Film, Film Company Slovo, CTB Filmproduction, Filmcontract Ltd, Pallas Film, ZDF, Schweizer Fernsehen. DVD: Zeitgeist Films (U.K.).

of a nearby family and the only single woman in the area. The girl's dark eyes peek out from behind a curtain while her parents and their visitors sit around the floor of her yurt, the dour mother swishing flies away from food. Resplendent but weirdly out of place in his navy uniform, Asa tries to impress everyone by telling fantastic, wide-eyed stories of his life as a sailor. He has seen many strange creatures, ranging from the tiny seahorse to the giant octopus, which has a head like "a big hunk of meat, slimy like a brain" and "long tentacles, like hoses." When this beast grabs you, "you've got to bite it right between the eyes—if you're off by just a hair, you're dinner." Soon afterward, we learn that Tulip has rejected Asa, ostensibly because his ears are too big. Boni, who drives a battered delivery truck decorated with porno-magazine photos of big-breasted women and outfitted with a sound system that blasts out "Rivers of Babylon," tries to intervene by showing the prospective bride's parents a picture of Britain's Princess Diana and Prince Charles, who also has wing-like ears. This gesture has no effect. We never see Tulpan's face, only the back of her head and her beautifully lustrous black hair, but we indirectly discover that she wants to move to the city and attend college. (Her entire family feels superior to Asa's.) Meanwhile, Asa's brother-in-law has encountered problems of his own, threatening his livelihood: the pregnant sheep in his herd are underfed and giving birth to stillborn lambs.

John Ford once told Peter Bogdanovich that the best things in movies, such as the thunderstorm in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), are purely accidental. Orson Welles agreed, describing a movie director as "someone who presides over accidents." *Tulpan* provides plenty of supporting evidence; its most impressive moments are contingencies or acts of God that Dvortsevoy, aided by Polish photographer Jola Dylewska, anticipated and skillfully integrated into the plot and mise-en-scène. Shot in widescreen color with heavy 35mm equipment, the film is filled with sublime vistas: we see limitless horizons dotted with dry grass, tornados of dust with columns reaching up to the sky, and in one beautiful composition we tilt down from dark blue storm clouds to a white puppy sitting on the ground and chewing a bone as lightning forks angrily in the distance. But the style also involves long takes and a good deal of restless, seize-the-opportunity reframing at close quarters. One of the most amusing performers is Nurzhigit Zhapabayev, the chubby, rambunctious three-year-old who plays Nuka, Asa's youngest nephew; virtually undirectable, this character is photographed on the fly as he rides his stick horse across the steppe or zooms around the yurt tormenting his older brother and converting his pet turtle into a toy motorcar.

Equally undirectable are the animals—not only the sheep but also the chickens, dogs, cows, donkeys, horses, and camels that interact with humans and arrange themselves in configurations no choreographer could have invented. In one shot, a large herd of sheep and goats, crowded head to rump and obscured by clouds of dust, is driven away from the camera, followed by three barking dogs, two braying donkeys, a mule, a puppy, and Nuka on his stick horse. The sheep move offscreen, and on the horizon the male mule tries to mount a female donkey; Nuka stops, transfixed, staring at the two animals as his mother's off-screen voice calls and tries to distract him. In another fascinating and funny long take, a veterinarian arrives at the yurt on a motorbike with a sidecar holding a bandaged baby camel. The vet, who resembles an aging jockey, examines one of Ondas's dead lambs, nervously rolling a Russian cigarette from one corner of his mouth to another while in the background a mother camel watches and mournfully cries. The vet advises everyone to pretend the mother isn't there; she's been following him all day to protect her child, and she has a fierce bite. When he drives off, given a push-start by Ondas's family, the camel chases after him toward the horizon, bellowing all the way. (Interviewed by Adam Nayman in *Cinema Scope*, Dvortsevoy explained that just before he started shooting this scene, he noticed the mother camel crying in fear that her baby would be harmed, and decided on the spur of the moment to include her in the shot.)

For all its comedy, *Tulpan* is no idyllic pastoral. Its beauty is suffused with a poignant sense of the fragility of life on the steppe, and the harsh labor and cramped living conditions of the shepherd family: the mother makes cheese by hand in a heavy vessel, the father tries to wrestle an enormous pregnant sheep onto the back of a recalcitrant horse, a child pees into a wide bowl at the center of the crowded yurt, and another child pops open the blackheads on his father's back. Yet none of this seems depressing and the characters retain lively individuality. The mother cherishes the brightly wrapped hard candy delivered from town; the daughter loudly sings folk songs, much to the annoyance of her father; and the oldest son listens to a portable radio, memorizing the news broadcasts and repeating them verbatim to the family every evening. ("Hold your head high, independent country! . . . Breaking news! A strong earthquake occurred yesterday in Japan.") Asa believes in the pastoral ideal and returns home with a drawing of his most cherished dream on the back of his sailor's collar: a yurt and two camels under the sky. At one point he goes to a shed next to Tulpan's yurt and whispers to her through a closed door, promising "a little corner of paradise under the starry skies of the Kazakh steppe." (He doesn't realize that he's actually speaking to a goat.) When his dream begins to disintegrate, he seems fated to move to the city. "There are tons of babes there," Boni declares, but the film suggests that for the shepherds of the Betpak-Dala, the city actually offers nothing but drugs and wretched jobs.

A kind of resolution is achieved in a seven-and-a-half-minute take in which Asa comes across a sheep on the verge of giving birth. Alone and desperate, he turns the swollen, woolly animal on her side, examines her vulva, and begins pulling at the feet of a lamb stuck in her uterus. She emits low, hoarse moans until finally, after a long struggle, her lamb breaks free and spills onto the ground. Asa wipes away bits of placenta, clears dirt from the lamb's mouth, and administers mouth-to-mouth resuscitation until it jerks into life. The technically difficult shot is handheld, panning to capture details; squarely in the tradition of Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), it respects the spatial and temporal unity of the event and powerfully documents a miraculous collaboration between animal and human. At the fictional level, it functions as a rite of passage for Asa. At the film's close, his family has been told by the state supervisor ("Comrade Boss") to move their yurt to more fertile ground. As they pull down their home and prepare for the journey, Asa rides off with Boni in the opposite direction, toward the city. Suddenly he jumps from the truck and returns to join the family. His future is uncertain, but he has added a large red tulip to the drawing on his naval collar.

4. HENRI-GEORGES CLOUZOT'S INFERNO

In 1964, after a four-year period during which he suffered depression as a result of his wife's death and made no films, Henri-Georges Clouzot recovered his health, remarried, and embarked on a new project entitled *L'enfer* (*Inferno*), which was to tell the story of a provincial hotel-keeper in his mid-forties who marries a pretty young woman and becomes pathologically jealous, vividly imagining her sexual affairs and losing his grip on reality. At the beginning of the screenplay (which in 1994 Claude Chabrol adapted for a film of his own with the same title), the wife lies on a bed as the husband stands over her with a razor in his hand. We don't know if she's alive or dead, and the husband has no knowledge of how he came to be in the room. After an extensive tour through the corridors of the husband's memories and fantasies, we return to the opening scene, and the madman has no more sense of his bearings than he did at the start.

Clouzot had been impressed by Fellini's *8½* (1963) and wanted to create a modernist film that could stand comparison with any achievement of the new European art cinema. (The French New Wave had treated him as an old-fashioned type who indulged in too much fussy preparation—something they never said of Hitchcock.) To this end he tried to develop a special imagery of subjectivity and madness appropriate to the masochistic eroticism, anxiety, and violence prompted by jealousy. He prepared a 300-page shooting script (co-written with José-André Lacour and Jean Ferry), a color-coded chart that tracked his protagonist's emotions, and storyboards that were true to the perspective and focal length of individual shots. In the role of the wife, he cast Romy Schneider, a European star with a sunny but vixen-like face. For the husband he chose Serge Reggiani, a spindly-legged, almost comic-looking actor who had appeared in one of Clouzot's earlier films. In supporting roles were Jean-Claude Bercq, a near parody of movie virility, and Dany Carrel, a saucy brunette with a provocative body. When Columbia Pictures in Hollywood saw the tests shots of the actors and visual effects, they gave Clouzot an open-ended budget, enabling him to hire the best technical staff in France and conduct further visual and sound experiments in complete freedom at a studio in Boulogne.

Location shooting began in July at a hotel situated on a lake in the south of France. Because of an impending hydro-electric project, the lake was scheduled to be drained by the end of August, but Clouzot brought along several camera crews to speed production. Several weeks into the shooting, however, he got bogged down, filming scenes over and over with no clear object in mind while the extra units stood idle. His fabled perfectionism—it had taken him three years to make *The Wages of Fear* (1952)—seemed irrational, and his chronic insomnia put extra burdens on the actors and crew. Exhausted and humiliated, Reggiani walked off the set and never returned. A few weeks later, while filming a sex scene between Schneider and Dany Carrel, Clouzot suffered a heart attack. Although he eventually recovered, *Inferno* was never completed.

What survived were 185 cans of film (thirteen hours), thirty minutes of experimental sound, the screenplay, the storyboards, and various paper records. We are fortunate that producer Serge Bromberg, one of the world's best talents at film restoration, was able to secure rights to this material from Clouzot's widow. He and Ruxandra Medrea have directed a documentary history of *Inferno*, consisting of interviews with some of the original participants (including Costa-Gavras, who was one of the assistant directors), a few stylized reenactments of scenes from the screenplay, an eerie music score by Bruno Alexiu, and a rich sampling of the surviving footage. The result is rather like a river of disturbingly sexual dreams bounded by a rational discourse. Most of Clouzot's images are fragmentary and experimental, drifting somewhat free from their narrative context and allowing us to construct our own scenarios; they constitute the very essence of romantic or surreal aesthetics (in other words, of fetishism). There is no way of knowing exactly how or even if Clouzot would have used many of them, but a completed *Inferno* could scarcely have been more fascinating to watch.

The film was shot in both black-and-white and color. One of the participants interviewed by Bromberg says that black-and-white was supposed to represent moments of ordinary reality, but the images don't support that claim—for example, a low-level, black-and-white close-up of Romy Schneider's nude torso strapped to a railroad track as a massive steam engine rushes toward her and stops just next to her face. Clouzot was interested in pre-digital tricks of perspective and visual logic in a variety of formats, and he commissioned specialists to build "impossible" objects. The mid-1960s were the heyday of Op Art, kinetic art, and electro-acoustical sound, which he eagerly appropriated. His staff photographed geometric patterns in black-and-white and color, which he seems to have regarded as "optical coitus." His protagonist's psychic breaks and fits of jealousy motivated images of deformed vision and imagination, often to the point of disgust—men with unnaturally large heads, a fly's-eye view of a nose multiplied a hundred times, faces that bend and stretch into demonic shapes, mutilated hands, magnified facial hair and flesh, and so forth. At one point a face becomes half husband and half rival, then half rival and half wife. Lab technician Claude Leon and makeup artist

Jealousy, distortion, mania

Henri-Georges Clouzot's Inferno. © 2009 Lobster Films, France 2 Cinéma. DVD: Park Circus (U.K.)

Michel Deruelle specialized in bizarre color effects—unnaturally white skin with black or purple lips, a face covered in glittering sequins, a water-skiing scene in which a lake suddenly turns blood red and flesh turns blue. Meanwhile sound engineer Jean-Louis Decarme recorded moments of insane internal babbling that changed its speed, multiplied, and became fugal: "Your wound's opened again. What did you expect? Your wound's opened. Look. Look . . . That excite you? We play bitch mama. Bang bang dickory dock. You bitch! Let him feel her up. Stick in things lying around."

The chief object of the camera's gaze was Romy Schneider, photographed with optical tricks and in a multitude of costumes and hair and makeup styles. She's at first a chaste bride and happy young mother, but soon she morphs into a fantastically eroticized creature who wears short shorts or bikinis, fondles her nude body, laughs as she drinks an inexhaustible glass of champagne, languidly exhales plumes of cigarette smoke, plays suggestively with a Slinky toy, and smiles and twitches her pelvis as she water-skis. She and her lover cavort on a lake in skimpy swimsuits, briefly disappearing behind a hill for a bout of sex, and she engages in slow, teasing foreplay with a young woman. In most cases she looks back at us with taunting eyes. Woven alongside her image and sometimes blending with it are several visual motifs: the water of the lake and the curtain of flowing water that Schneider occasionally penetrates with her face or tongue; a

train that crosses a railroad suspension bridge and seems to set off episodes of madness; and lengthy tracking shots of different fully clothed men running on more or less empty roads. In the last category we see a middle-aged man jogging down a city street with his arms stiffly at his sides, a young man running at full speed past a group of cyclists who seem to move in slow motion, and Serge Reggiani wearing a business suit and running a great distance on a mountain highway. (It's a wonder Reggiani didn't also have a heart attack.)

The running men are unintentionally emblematic of the director. *Henri-Georges Clouzot's Inferno* documents the adventure of an important artist who was given free rein to make his most technically and formally ambitious project—the film of his dreams, in more senses than one—and who, like his fictional protagonist, became lost in his own obsessive visions and terrible drives. For all the power and variety of the imagery Clouzot produced, his footage takes on the quality of a morbid symptom—a crazy loop, a repetition compulsion, a desire that by definition can't be satisfied and ends in death. To watch the shards and fragments of the incomplete film and to learn the history of their production is to experience a kind of cinematic mania, frenzied and spellbinding even though it goes nowhere.

5. *35 SHOTS OF RUM*

2009 saw an unusual number of films directed by women—a phenomenon that might be cause for celebration, except that, as Manohla Dargis has pointed out in *The New York Times*, women accounted for only about ten percent of the productions that were distributed and reviewed in 2009. In any case, several of them were among the year's best.

My own favorite is Claire Denis's *35 Shots of Rum*, about which I'll say little because it was discussed at length in two fine essays (by Yvette Bíro and James S. Williams) in the winter 2009–10 *Film Quarterly*. It has several things in common with Denis's previous work: a collaboration with coscreenwriter Jean-Pol Fargeau and photographer Agnès Godard; an interest in the multiracial society of postcolonial Europe; a focus on characters of African descent (often portrayed by Alex Descas, whom Denis once described as her "muse"); and, most of all, an oblique narrative technique that Judith Mayne in *Claire Denis* (University of Illinois Press, 2005) has described as "a sense of displacement, of choosing to move around an object or a theme or a person, instead of moving in directly."

35 Shots of Rum was inspired by Ozu's *Late Spring* (1949), a movie with which it shares a mellow tone, a subtle registration of emotional detail, and a touching, unsentimental treatment of everyday domesticity; but as we might expect

Mellow celebration
35 Shots of Rum. Courtesy of The Cinema Guild.

with Denis, it has a more indirect narrative form than the Ozu picture and a more working-class milieu. At the beginning, we don't know the exact relationship between Lionel (Descas), who works for the commuter rail system in Paris, and Joséphine (Mati Diop), a young woman who lives with him in a small but pleasant high-rise apartment on the outskirts of the city. Given their attractiveness and intimate household routine, they might be lovers. It takes a while to realize that Lionel is a widower and that Joséphine, his daughter, is contemplating marriage, perhaps to Noé (Grégoire Colin), a broodingly romantic fellow who lives with his cat in a large apartment on the top floor of the building. Another neighbor, Gabrielle (Nicole Dogué), a warm-hearted, cigarette-smoking taxi driver who may have been Lionel's lover in the past, tries to get close to him, but to no avail. Without any overt signposting by actors or dialog, we gradually sense that Joséphine is concerned about her father's apparently lonely future after she leaves.

The film situates its characters in relation to European history and politics (at her university, Joséphine reads Franz Fanon and Joseph Stiglitz but declines to march in a student protest), yet these matters have no direct bearing on the domestic issues. The characters are at first enigmatic, rather like strangers in real life, and Denis surprises us when, late in the film, Lionel drives his daughter to Germany for a visit to her white mother's grave and her white grandmother's home; the racial and class differences between the two sides of the family are striking but are registered without any preparation, dramatic tension, or editorializing. Denis takes a different approach when her four main characters are caught in a rainstorm and enter the warm glow of an African Caribbean restaurant. This scene, involving little more than nicely edited glances, dance movements, and subtle gestures, is a turning point in the narrative—a moment when the father and the daughter take up sexual partners and when, as James S. Williams observes, "relationships are reconfigured and desire safely channeled." With its orange candlelight and use of "Nightshift" by the Commodores, it creates a wonderfully sensual and sexy atmosphere and goes straight to the heart of the story.

6. *THE HURT LOCKER*

One of the most critically successful films of 2009, Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* is usually described by reviewers as "apolitical" or "non-political." I'm baffled by this description, because no representation of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq can fail to have political implications or to provoke political discussion.

Perhaps we need to be reminded of a few facts. *The Hurt Locker* is told from the point of view of a three-man team of U.S. soldiers whose job is to find and dispose of improvised bombs in the streets of Baghdad during the blistering hot summer of 2004. The soldier responsible for actually defusing the bombs (Jeremy Renner) is a war lover—cocky, resourceful, courageous, but so dangerous to his own men that at one point they consider fragging him. The Baghdad streets are littered with garbage because all public services are shut down, and explosive devices capable of obliterating everything in a 300-yard radius are hidden everywhere. The soldiers are observed by Iraqi citizens who go about their business or stand watching from rooftops, occasionally taking pictures or talking on mobile phones. Kids chase after the soldiers, some of them smiling and waving, others throwing rocks. Nobody in the three-man team can speak Arabic, hence they have no idea when the locals are cursing them (neither do we, because the film doesn't give us subtitles). The soldier who defuses bombs tries to reach out to an English-speaking Iraqi teenager, but ends up making a horrible blunder that causes him to shut down emotionally and refuse to recognize the kid. Iraqi civilians are blown up more often than the military, and no justification for the war is given. The western armies seem to be composed mainly of volunteer soldiers from poor backgrounds and "independent contractors" looking for bounty. When the war-loving soldier ends his tour of duty, his hometown Walmart looks more surreal than Baghdad. He can hardly wait to return to Camp Victory. When we last see him, he is back at the front, walking toward death in heavy protective armor.

How anybody could call this an apolitical movie is beyond me. Maybe critics choose to ignore everything but the fact that *The Hurt Locker* is also an exciting, highly suspenseful action picture that makes us partly identify with the bomb squad and admire their grace under pressure. I've become impatient with contemporary thrillers that use multiple cameras, long lenses, and frenetic editing, but Kathryn Bigelow manipulates the technique with great intelligence and stomach-tightening intensity. The film was shot in handheld 16mm to give it a slightly grainy, documentary look; for the large set pieces involving bombs and a firefight in the desert, cinematographer Barry Ackroyd employed a team of eight or nine

War addict

The Hurt Locker. © 2008 Hurt Locker LLC. DVD: Lionsgate (U.K.).

cameras running simultaneously, along with a high-speed camera that enables us to see an explosion lifting gravel from the ground and rust from the top of a car. Editors Bob Murawski and Chris Innis sifted through a mountain of film to construct these sequences, cutting very effectively from the tense U.S. soldiers to the watching Iraqis and from wide shots of the entire battle area to close-ups of intimate detail. Paul N. J. Ottoson's sound design helps considerably, making suspense and surprise not just from explosions but also from the sounds of a buzzing fly and a squeaking windshield wiper.

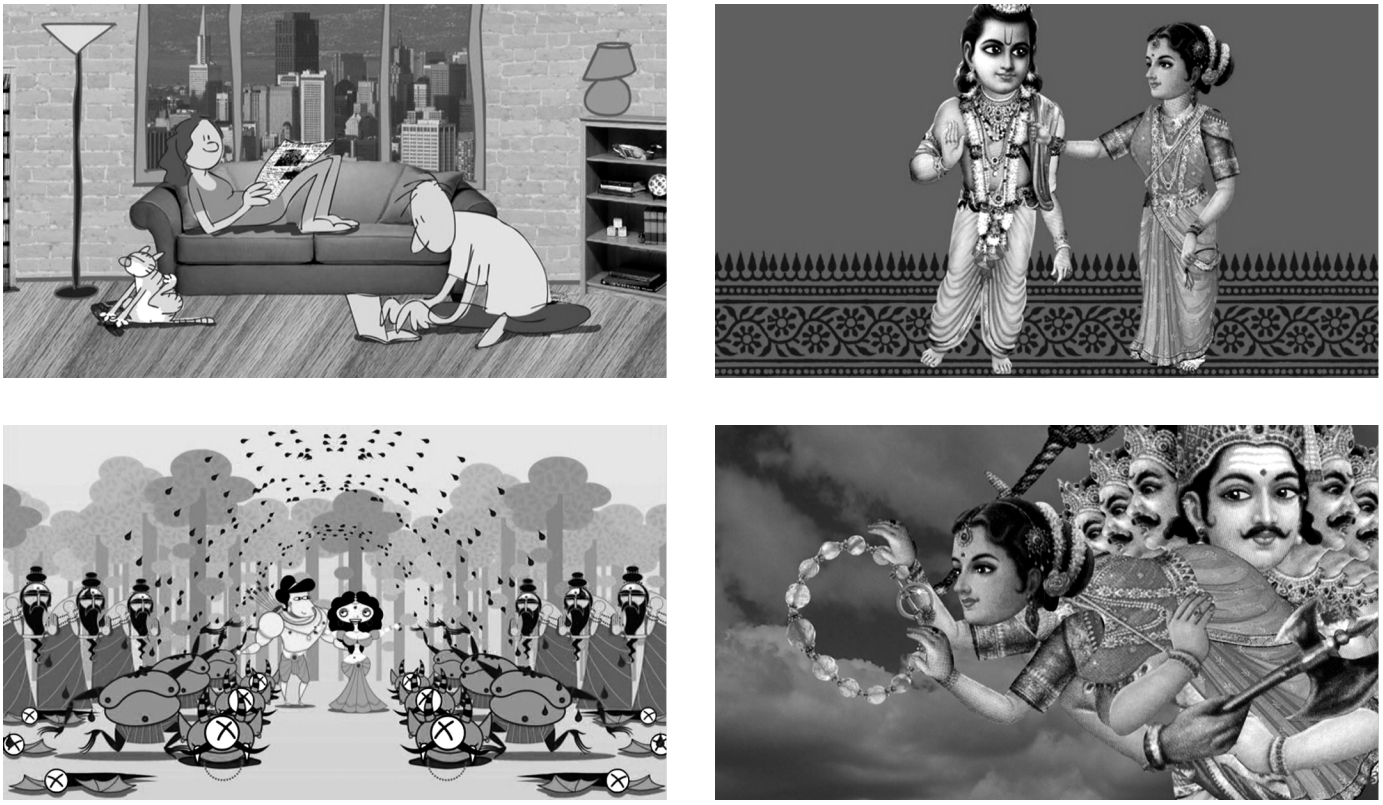
U.S. Army veterans have complained of the film's inaccuracies: the uniforms are wrong for 2004, U.S. soldiers in Iraq can't get drunk in their quarters, and we shouldn't see an isolated unit patrolling the desert. I'd add that screenplay by

Mark Boal, who also worked on *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), is a bit too schematic in its characterizations, the theme of war as an addiction doesn't need such heavy emphasis, and there ought to be more black actors. But these problems are far outweighed by the film's action sequences and ability to render the cruelty and futility of the Iraq war. A low-budget production financed outside the U.S., *The Hurt Locker* has no stars apart from a few cameo appearances; hence it doesn't overtly solicit our identification with the fine lead players. It was shot entirely on location in Jordan, only a few miles from the Iraq border, where no Hollywood studio would have gone. The temperature averaged 114 degrees Fahrenheit, and the effect of the heat and dust on the actors is palpable; they have the weary, stressed look of soldiers who have reduced another culture to rubble, who can't distinguish friend from foe, and whose attempt to dispose of bombs seems only to prolong destruction.

7. SITA SINGS THE BLUES

Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues*, a 2D animated feature that puts a modern woman's amusing spin on the ancient Indian *Ramayana* of Valmiki, is an almost-do-it-yourself film on behalf of almost-free culture. Written, produced, directed, designed, and animated by Paley (with a little help from the Guggenheim Foundation, the music of Todd Michaelson and Redresh Manhanthappa, the sound design of Greg Sexto, and several voiceover actors), the film looks gorgeous on the big screen, but had very limited theatrical release and a DVD printing of only 4,999 copies. Its scarcity is due to the fact that Paley uses 1920s recordings of Annette Hanshaw singing Tin Pan Alley tunes—an act which, in the context of an animated movie, is regarded as a copyright infringement. Rather than pay huge royalties, Paley's response has been to distribute the film under a "Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License," giving it away free on the web and asking viewers to make a monetary contribution to her if they like. "From the shared culture it came," she says on her website (www.sitasingstheblues.com), "and back to the shared culture it goes." The credits begin with "Your Name Here Presents, in association with Your Money, a Funded by You Production."

Sita Sings the Blues came about when Paley's husband unceremoniously broke up with her by email after taking a high-tech job in India. Grieving and alone, she found solace with her cat and the study of the *Ramayana*. In the film she weaves together her personal story with a condensed retelling of the ancient Indian text, which she humorously reconfigures as the tale of a sympathetic woman treated badly by an insensitive, disloyal man. I won't try to summarize the complicated narrative, except to say that parts of it concern



Several styles of heartbreak

Sita Sings the Blues. © 2008 Nina Paley Productions LLC. DVD: FilmKaravan.

an Indian prince named Rama whose loyal wife, Sita, undergoes incredible tribulations and ends her life by being swallowed up by the earth. In the film, her story is told by three Indian shadow puppets voiced by Aseem Chhabra, Bhavana Nagulapally, and Manish Achara, whose very funny, unscripted exchange is full of vague recollections and uncertain details. They aren't sure if the *Ramayana* is true, but decide that it's probably just as true as the Bible. They don't know exactly when it was written ("It's definitely BC"), and they sometimes disagree about events. ("Didn't he die?" "I think he died." "He died eventually.")

Like many ancient myths, *Sita Sings the Blues* has a repetitive, somewhat redundant quality and different local versions. (This is not a negative criticism.) The story of Paley's broken marriage repeats or parallels the adventures of Sita, which are represented first as narrated or "acted" events with dialogue, then as musical numbers in which Sita sings about her sad love life ("Daddy Won't You Please Come Home," "Mean to Me," "Am I Blue"). This embellishment of the story motivates a variety of animation styles: the modern episodes involving Paley are drawn in a sketchy, "Squigglevision" technique; many of the episodes from the *Ramayana* are depicted in the *Rajput* style of eighteenth-century Indian manuscript illustration; Sita's musical numbers make use of vector-graphic animation in which cartoon characters move like paper dolls; and at one point Paley rotoscopes an Indian dance. When we shift from one style to another, Rama and Sita change their appearance: sometimes he's a figure from an old illuminated tapestry and sometimes a cartoon muscle man; sometimes she's a veiled princess from a fairy tale and sometimes a cross between Betty Boop and Mae West.

According to Paley, all this playful manipulation of the *Ramayana* has offended people from both ends of the political spectrum. Conservative Hindus apparently think of her film as blasphemy, and some left-wing types have accused it of neocolonialism. These people obviously have no sense of humor. Paley's respect for Indian culture is everywhere evident and she seems to have a genuine interest in the *Ramayana*. (Hers is one of the few movies I've seen with a scholarly bibliography in the end credits.) Most of the joking and wit is quite gentle or at Paley's own expense. Meanwhile the film gives us a kaleidoscopic explosion of colorful animated images, backed by captivating music. It uses low-budget digital animation, but it brims with imagination and can stand artistic comparison with anything by Pixar.

8. *ME AND ORSON WELLES*

Richard Linklater's new film, based on a young-adult novel by Robert Kaplow, imagines a week in 1937 when, through a combination of boyish self-confidence and amazing good luck, a teenage acting hopeful finds himself momentarily swept up into the whirlwind staging of Orson Welles's *Julius Caesar*, only to be tossed back onto the street. Linklater captures something of what Wordsworth was describing in his reminiscences of France at the time of the revolution: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,/But to be young was very Heaven!" He also gives us a sense of how an idealistic, energetic theatrical company can become an ambitious young man's family of choice, but a family with the same rivalries and disillusionments as any other.

Fictional movies about Orson Welles usually take relish in portraying him as an egoist who stole credit from his associates. *Me and Orson Welles* adds several other character flaws, one of which, womanizing, was no doubt true. Kaplow's novel makes an even uglier charge: after an argument with technician Samuel Leve, who wants credit as a scenic designer on the show's playbill, Welles is overheard muttering, "Credit-stealing, son-of-a-bitch Jew!" The film retains this argument—during which Welles thunderously declares that *Julius Caesar* is "my vision"—but thankfully drops the anti-Semitic remark. In Welles's defense, I can only say that his quite lengthy and courageous fight against racial prejudice is a matter of public record. Where Leve's contribution to *Julius Caesar* is concerned, I refer readers to John Houseman's *Run-Through: A Memoir* (Simon and Schuster, 1972), pages

In the limelight

Me and Orson Welles. © 2009 CinemaNX Films One Ltd.
DVD: CinemaNX (U.K.).

296–98, where we are told that the design of the show was entirely Welles's own, and that Leve's job, under the direction of Jean Rosenthal, was to convert Welles's design sketches into blueprints.

Me and Orson Welles benefits from the device of seeing everything from the dazzled viewpoint of seventeen-year-old Richard Samuels (Zac Efron), who finds himself cast in the small role of Brutus's page (the song he sings in the play, "Orpheus with His Lute," was originally set to music by Marc Blitzstein, whom the film never mentions). As historical reenactment, however, it provides virtually no sense of the politics of the Mercury Theater and too little evidence of why *Julius Caesar* made such a powerful impression on those who saw it. The Mercury actors, most of whom came from the WPA, worked for scale and were never under contract; most of the seats in the theater were sold to students and working people; and *Julius Caesar* was staged in modern dress (an innovation at the time) because it had Brechtian overtones, commenting directly on the rise of fascism. In the film, all this is subordinated to behind-the-scenes sexual shenanigans and Welles's will to power. When we see snippets of the show on opening night, the staging is reasonably accurate but lacks the disturbing patterns of light and darkness and the aura of violence that stunned the original audience.

The film nevertheless has redeeming qualities, some of which I've already suggested. As its title indicates, it depicts not just Welles but nearly everybody in the Mercury Theater as amusingly ambitious and narcissistic; even Efron, star of Disney's *High School Musical* franchise and heartthrob for millions of teenage girls, skillfully reveals the calculation lurking behind innocence. But the chief delight of *Me and Orson Welles* is Christian McKay, who gives a superb impersonation of Welles. Talented movie stars who mimic real-life celebrities—Clint Eastwood as John Huston, for example, or Meryl Streep as Julia Child—normally rely on one or two key features of voice and body, creating a sort of overlap or interaction between star persona and role; in contrast, McKay, a British stage actor who has performed successfully in a one-man show about Welles, knows his man's smallest mannerisms. He's a bit old for the role (Welles was twenty-two at the time), but he merges with the character to a greater degree than a well-known movie actor could have done. To hear him read a key passage out of Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons* is a delight; he takes obvious pleasure in the part, enabling us to see that Welles was not simply a flamboyant personality but an actor and director of seriousness and importance who could bring audiences to their feet.

9. *SUMMER HOURS*

Olivier Assayas's *Summer Hours* belongs to a series of recent French films made with the support of the Musée d'Orsay. (Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Flight of the Red Balloon*, discussed in last summer's "Films of the Year," belongs to the same series.) The story of a mother who bequeaths a house and its art objects to her three children, it subtly dramatizes the relationship between the bourgeois domestic interior and such things as history, personal memory, commodities, and art. In many respects, Walter Benjamin's comments on the invention of the domestic interior in "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" could serve as its epigraph: "The private individual, who in the office has to deal with realities, needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions. This necessity is all the more pressing since he has no intention of

Tax-deductible beauty
Summer Hours. © MK2 SA, France 3 Cinéma. DVD: Artificial Eye (U.K.)

grafting onto his business interests a clear perception of his social function. In the arrangement of his private surroundings, he suppresses both of these concerns. From this derive the phantasmagorias of the interior . . . The interior is the asylum where art takes refuge. The collector proves to be the true resident of the interior . . . To him falls the Sisyphean task of divesting things of their commodity character by taking possession of them."

Here "the asylum where art takes refuge" is the small country home of Hèléne Berthier (Edith Scob, the still beautiful star of Franju's *Les Yeux sans visage* [1959]), which is filled with her former lover's well-chosen collection of paintings, pottery, and furniture. When she dies, the problem of disposing of the property falls to her three successful children —a Parisian economist (Charles Berling), a corporate executive who is about to move to China (Jérémie Renier), and a designer of luxury kitchenware who has settled in New York (Juliette Binoche). The global economy has scattered the siblings to faraway places and the mother's house no longer has use value; many of its art objects have beauty and deep sentimental importance to the family, but to avoid estate taxes the more valuable items are donated to the Musée d'Orsay.

Among the visual pleasures of the film are *plein air* scenes of two large gatherings at the country house and a family dinner party in a Paris apartment. Everything is tasteful and casually civilized, but quietly suggestive of the Americanization of French culture, the links between art and commodities, and the similarities and differences between the home and the museum. The style and the general atmosphere of humane intelligence are in some ways reminiscent of Renoir, especially when Assayas and photographer Eric Gautier stage scenes with five or six characters moving in and out of rooms. There is also a poignant moment that reminded me of Virginia Woolf, when the mother's loyal servant revisits the grounds of the closed and emptied house. Like some of Woolf's fiction, *Summer Hours* is as light as a butterfly's wings, but its structure is as strong as steel.

10. *ECCENTRICITIES OF A BLONDE-HAIRED GIRL*

At age 100, Manoel de Oliveira just keeps going. His latest is a 64-minute adaptation of a short story by José Maria de Eça de Queirós, Portugal's most admired nineteenth-century author. Oliveira moves the story forward to the present day, but retains its codes of behavior. The effect is rather like Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), minus the overt eroticism —a sort of palimpsest that retains the essential features of an earlier culture. In the case of *Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl*, the feeling of modern-dress reenactment is heightened by the old-world conservatism of Eça's characters

Dejection
Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl. Courtesy of Pyramide International.

and by Oliveira's severe formal restraint and clever use of Lisbon settings. He shows time passing with repeated shots of the sun rising or setting over the oldest part of the city; he stages a scene in a gentleman's club where mementos of Eça are on display; and his characters visit a salon in an old mansion where they gamble while listening to a harp concerto and the recitation of a poem by Fernando Pessoa.

The narrative has a flashback structure, framed by a train journey during which Macário (Richard Trepa) impulsively tells a stranger in the seat next to him (Leonor Silveira, who has worked with Oliveira on many occasions) the story of a broken love affair. While working as an accounting clerk in his uncle's fabric shop, he was smitten by the sight of a beautiful blond-haired woman with an ornate fan (Catarina Wallenstein) in a window across the street. His uncle disowned him when he expressed his desire to marry this woman, but as the result of some rather shady business dealings in Cape Verde he became wealthy and obsessively sought her out. Just as they became engaged, however, he discovered one of her unsettling "peculiarities," which caused him to break off the relationship. The last shot shows the dejected young woman sitting alone in her room, and comes as a shock. One of the most arresting images of 2009, it has the surreal quality of a painting by Balthus and is a splendid example of the way Oliveira, somewhat like Carl Theodor Dreyer, can disrupt a placid surface with uncanny force.

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ABSTRACT This article presents reviews of the author's selection of the best films released in the U.S. in 2009: *Police, Adjective; Shirin; Tulpan; Henri-Georges Clouzot's Inferno; 35 Shots of Rum; The Hurt Locker; Sita Sings the Blues; Me and Orson Welles; Summer Hours; Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl.*

KEYWORDS Corneliu Porumboiu, Abbas Kiarostami, Sergey Dvortsevoy, Serge Bromberg, Claire Denis

NO FUN: DEBUNKING THE 1960S IN *MAD MEN* AND *A SERIOUS MAN*

J. M. TYREE COMPARES TWO DRAMAS WITH GLOOMY VIEWS OF A STORIED DECADE

"Living in the past is my future," laments Charley (Julianne Moore) in Tom Ford's film *A Single Man*, an adaptation from Christopher Isherwood set in 1962 Los Angeles. Charley is nostalgic for remembrances of things past with her gay best friend George (Colin Firth). But her remarks could be made to reflect on a major television series (*Mad Men*) and a crop of 2009 films (*A Single Man*, *An Education*, and *A Serious Man*) set in the 1960s. As a demographic group, many of the filmmakers, writers, and producers of these works can be included in the tail end of the Baby Boom. But they all experienced the decade as children, not politically awakening university students—it appears significant that all of these productions have pre-'68 settings. Joel Coen (b. 1954) and Ethan Coen (b. 1957) set *A Serious Man* in 1967 in a suburban Minnesotan Jewish enclave seemingly insulated from social turmoil. The screenplay by Nick Hornby (b. 1957) for *An Education*, set in 1961, frames the sexual coming-of-age of its female protagonist as a dubious lark. Ford (b. 1961) juxtaposes private grief with the unfolding Cuban missile crisis. *Mad Men*'s executive producer, Matthew Weiner (b. 1965), views the decade through the cynical lens of advertising. These productions are remarkable for their skepticism about the liberating potential of social change. About the lure of sexual revolution, they are downright uneasy.

"We're selling America," claims an executive from the Lucky Strike cigarette corporation during the very first episode of *Mad Men*. Don Draper (Jon Hamm), marketing guru at the New York firm of Sterling Cooper, counters that "advertising is based on one thing—happiness." It's "freedom from fear . . . a billboard on the side of the road that screams, with reassurance, that whatever you're doing is okay. You are okay." Don is likeable because of this cutting cultural intelligence, and also because he is a loner, an outsider drawn to other outsiders with secret lives. In the show's opening episode, he becomes attracted to a Jewish department store owner, Rachel Mencken (Maggie Siff), who "knows what it feels like to be out of place" as both an ethnic minority and a businesswoman. The introduction of Don's wife, Betty (January Jones), is held in reserve as a final shock at the end of the episode, positioning his perfect suburban family life as a perfect lie. As the season continues, flashbacks gradually reveal a secret past: a dustbowl childhood and a mystery subplot in which he assumed the identity of Don Draper from a comrade killed in the Korean War. Don is not even Don. He's Dick Whitman, whose long climb out of desperate poverty has produced a literally "self-made" man.

Yet because Don is out of joint with his times, he's also a refreshing antidote to the stifling conformity of the early 1960s world. His sexual politics, although accurately appalling—"I won't have a woman speak to me that way," he initially says of Rachel in a meeting—are put in the shade by even worse men at work. There appears to be another side to Don's character, first revealed when he sticks up for his new secretary, Peggy Olson (Elisabeth Moss). When she gets pregnant by the sleazy mid-level executive Peter Campbell (Vincent Kartheiser) after her very first day at work, Don becomes a kind of mentor. He encourages her to dump the baby and move on with her career, and the historical, ethical, political, and psychological complexities of this act are not shirked in *Mad Men*. In season 3, Don appears similarly helpful to Salvatore Romano (Bryan Batt) about the latter's own secret life as a closeted gay man attempting to survive the fraternal order of corporate culture. Which is not to go so far as to suggest that Don is a saint: he turns on Salvatore ("You people!") when he refuses to give on-the-job sexual favors to the scion of Lucky Strike. The culture's underlying nastiness about other people's desires is most apparent in the show's harsh depictions of brutality toward women. The sexual revolution has no corollary in feminism. When the show's most lively and wise character, Joan Holloway (Christina Hendricks), is sexually assaulted at work by her fiancé, she continues the relationship.

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MAD MEN: MELANCHOLY MARKETING

Mad Men. © 2007–09 Lions Gate Television Inc. DVD: Lionsgate Home Entertainment.

For Peggy, the pleasures promised by the Pill offer no real liberation—a doctor pours moralizing contempt on her, then prescribes the medication without explaining how it works. (*An Education* is set in the year Minister of Health Enoch Powell approved the two-shilling price for the contraceptive pill, and shares *Mad Men*'s cautionary, even conservative concern with the downside of a new sexual freedom.)

Don's decency toward minorities at work—gathering them into what at times appears to be an alternative family unit—sits uneasily with an impersonal, all-business attitude that verges on the sociopathic. He therefore becomes a cultural metonym for the inherent tolerance embedded in American capitalism but also its cruel utilitarianism—all are welcome to consume and be exploited, to be self-made and self-unmade. And there's a quasi-Fordist, mechanized aspect to Don's assembly line of extramarital affairs, as though his lovers are interchangeable parts or throwaway consumer products like the ones he's helping to sell. Yet unlike his picture-perfect blond wife, his serious mistresses are almost always dark-haired, as if selected from a lifestyle marketing catalogue of feisty intellectual brunettes. "What you call love," he tells Rachel in season 1 with an air of suave confidence, "was invented by guys like me, to sell nylons."

One of Don's bosses, Bert Cooper—played by Robert Morse, who four decades earlier had been the youthfully aspirant lead in *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (1967)—gives him a copy of Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* in season 1. Yet while Don often appears to others as a self-reliant businessman–artist who wouldn't be out of place in King Vidor's 1949 production of *The Fountainhead*, he's actually more like a living critique of Rand's ideas. Gary Cooper's Howard Roark in Vidor's film is incorruptible and heroically alone throughout much of the story, whereas Don finds his solitude far less comfortable. He looks for solace in the soft-limbed chimera of what today probably would be called a sex addiction. And while Roark's singular architectural genius is relentlessly emphasized as being the result of his refusal to "give in" to pleasing the masses, in season 3 Don becomes embroiled in a campaign to militate public opinion in favor of demolishing a gem of a building, New York's Penn Station. *Mad Men* takes pains to show the campaigns of Sterling Cooper as rather mediocre affairs combined from a bodge of market research and second-run sex appeal. Rand would not have approved. This is still a world of graft, compromise, and sheer old-fashioned unhappiness. As a post on a Rand forum (4aynrandfans.com) put it rather concisely about *Mad Men*, "These characters, almost all of them, are miserable!"

This isn't, however, a one-note show. There's room for more optimistic storylines and, in particular, Peggy's gradual steps toward empowerment in the wake of her childbirth, costly and hard-won, feel like genuine progress. During a lighter moment, Peggy gets high with her office mates during the creative phase of a "Daiquiri Beach" ad campaign for Barcardi—asserting her newfound status and self-image by saying, "I'm Peggy Olson and I want to smoke some marijuana." She's not experiencing false consciousness. But *Mad Men* boils down depressingly. As historical fiction, it limns similar territory as the 2002 Adam Curtis documentary *The Century of the Self*, which argues that the rise of marketing and public relations gave impetus to an increasingly "isolated, vulnerable, greedy self." Curtis notes that the inventor of the focus group, Ernest Dichter, believed that advertising and mass consumerism would reinforce civic values and make both citizens and society more stable. *Mad Men* depicts a more troubling scenario in which the concept of the family—whether Don's abandoned marriage or Peggy's abandoned child—is by 1960 already pulverized beyond recognition. Success in this world entails not only the constant violation of the categorical imperative, but also a debilitating form of loneliness. (Many shots in *Mad Men* discover characters isolated in urban spaces—offices, bars, diners, even stairwells—evocative of the lonely-looking paintings of Edward Hopper.) An American paradox is that the much-vaunted Emersonian characteristic of self-reliance dovetails rather nicely with the goals of big business to create a nation of isolated, vulnerable, and greedy selves who can be persuaded that buying products is a form of self-expression. If Curtis is right in arguing that "satisfaction of individual desires is our highest priority" as a culture, then Don Draper and Peggy Olson are emblematic figures in the rise of a funny kind of freedom.

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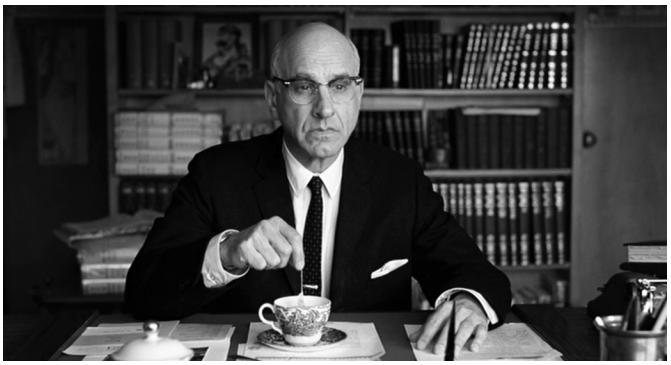
Some puzzlement attends the curious Yiddish prologue of *A Serious Man*, which is set in a completely different era and setting from the 1967 world of its main story. The parable of the visitor, Reb Groshkover (Fyvush Finkel), who gets stabbed because he may or may not be a dybbuk, frames the rest of the film as a story about religious Jews living in a world without God. Assuming that the appearance of blood on Groshkover's shirt is a sign that he's not, in fact, a demon—and therefore that the universe of *A Serious Man* has no supernatural dimension, so no interventionist deity controlling it (the point is not trivial to the film's meaning)—his laughter over his own injury is cosmic. In the spirit of Kafka, the Coens want to position their film in a space where one can appreciate the humor of things that are not at all funny, to make us laugh at the literal and figurative stabbings we are all destined to receive at one time or another. At the end of *The Trial*, Kafka's protagonist Josef K. also gets stabbed in the

A SERIOUS MAN: FROM STONED TO STOICISM



A Serious Man. © 2009 Focus Features LLC. DVD: Universal Studios (U.K.)

heart. Like Larry Gopnik (Michael Stulbarg), the film's earnest protagonist, Josef K. is the victim of a mysterious smear campaign. Larry is wounded in many ways throughout the film, although unlike Groshkover, he doesn't get the joke.

In another Kafka work, a short parable, a lost man races around an unfamiliar town trying to find the train station, only to encounter a laughing policeman who advises him to "Give It Up!" Many viewers of *A Serious Man* will surely have had a similar thought while watching Larry vainly try to survive a series of personal disasters that befall him in suburban Minnesota. His marriage is hijacked by a relentlessly cheerful adversary, Sy Ableman (Fred Melamed), who brings Larry wine and hugs him while stealing Judith (Sari Wagner Lennick). Though he utters friendly public platitudes—"Let's have a good talk!" and "We're going to be fine"—Sy writes poison-pen letters to the tenure committee at the small technical college where Larry teaches physics. Sy's a bit like a refugee from the Human Potential Movement who has studied the art of transpersonal psychology but seems interested in using it purely for his own selfish agenda. Meanwhile, a junior rabbi, Scott Ginzler (Simon Helberg), uses vague and worthless New Age mumbo-jumbo concepts to console Larry about his crumbling life. Encouraging Larry to examine the parking lot outside, he suggests that "with the right perspective" all his problems will simply vanish. Larry seeks another opinion. The second clergyman, Rabbi Nachtner (George Wyner), tells him a weirdly delightful but ultimately meaningless story about a Jewish dentist who finds a message etched in Hebrew letters on a patient's teeth: "Help me, save me." (As the dentist's story unfolds on-screen, Jimi Hendrix's 1969 "Machine Gun" plays anachronistically but powerfully on the soundtrack, unsettling the images of smalltown establishments, from dental office to Red Owl supermarket.) Yet the cabbalistic story of the goy's teeth, as it turns out, is an old Nachtner standby designed to lead listeners into unquestioning acceptance of God's mystery. "Why does God make us feel the question if he's not going to give us answers?" Larry asks Nachtner. "What does it mean?" "He hasn't told me," says the rabbi, as if dispensing wisdom. With Sy, Rabbi Scott, and Rabbi Nachtner, the 1960s vocabulary of universal brotherhood, the power of good vibes, and the parable-making of religious gurus amount to gibberish that is actively unhelpful. It's all a dodge, if not a con, like the slogans dreamed up in the offices of Sterling Cooper.

"Receive with simplicity everything that happens to you," suggests the Jewish sage Rashi in the film's epigraph. By the end of the film, these "Eastern," hippie-ish words encouraging passivity take on a pointedly ironic, even mocking tone. "Accept the mystery," suggests a father (Steve Park) attempting to bribe Larry on behalf of his son, who has failed the midterm. But doing so doesn't seem like a very good idea. The philosophy of Larry's brother Arthur (Richard Kind)—"It's all shit, Larry, it's all fucking shit!"—seems in better accord with the world we're shown. In *A Serious Man*, the fundamental state of things is perhaps best revealed, in a scene that could have been written by Kafka, when a lawyer who has found "a nifty way out" of Larry's property dispute with his anti-Semitic neighbor drops dead of a heart attack just as he's about to disclose his secret solution. In a dream sequence with similar import, Larry helps Arthur escape to Canada after Arthur's arrest for solicitation and sodomy in North Dakota, but just as Arthur waves goodbye he's shot in the back of the head with a bullet from a hunting rifle fired by the same anti-Semitic neighbors. It's not going to work out—that's the theme. Efforts to decipher the scheme of things are futile. Uncle Arthur's private obsession is a hand-scrawled scientific treatise of some kind called "The Mentaculus," which is described at one point as "a probability map of the universe" but in fact turns out to be page after page of incoherent designs and meaningless signs. *A Serious Man* presents much of life as a series of symbols and languages that cannot be interpreted in any definitive way. Larry's compassion for others flies in the face of all the evidence mounting in his world against the existence of any meaningful order. He takes on a Job-like mantle of virtuous patience simply by staying nice—but unlike in the case of his biblical predecessor, in the end God fails to return the favor. In a very poignant moment, Larry hugs his brother at the side of the empty pool of the Jolly Roger motel where they've both been exiled from the family home. The Coens depict Larry as quasi-heroic by virtue of sheer decency in the face of suffering and humiliation.

Larry is a sort of anti-Don Draper. Faced with the reappearance of his own half-brother, Adam (Jay Paulson), from his secret past in season 1 of *Mad Men*, Don views him as a threat to his new life. He tries to buy him off with $5,000 in exchange for leaving New York forever, but Adam hangs himself instead. Larry, by contrast, feels obliged to be his brother's keeper even following his arrest. In the opening episode of season 3 of *Mad Men*, Don cavorts with a stewardess on a business trip in a luxury hotel; Larry sleeps next to his disgraced brother in the bleak motel by the highway. Don maintains a steely calm, while Larry bares his searching soul to useless spiritual and legal counselors. Larry weeps in his lawyer's office and fields calls from his son about the TV antenna during billable hours; Don has constructed a wall around his place of work so as to be unreachable. While both Don and Larry are juggling to keep up the façade of family life in the face of social upheaval, Don's selfishness belongs to the realm of pathology, while Larry's selflessness makes him a bit of a

TWO KINDS OF LONELINESS

Left column: *Mad Men*. © 2007–09 Lions Gate Television Inc. DVD: Lionsgate Home Entertainment.
Right column: *A Serious Man*. © 2009 Focus Features LLC. DVD: Universal Studios (U.K.).

saint and a bit of a dupe. Don confuses masculinity with a lack of vulnerability. Larry remains an open book whose pulsing need to care for others is both oddly touching and pathetic. Of all the characters in *A Serious Man*, it's Judith, not Larry or Sy Ableman, who most resembles the hard-headed, unemotional, and self-sufficient Don Draper.

As in *Mad Men*, widespread use of marijuana in the square community is one element of the 1960s that appears as unadulterated fun here. The sequence in *A Serious Man* in which Larry's son Danny (Aaron Wolf) gets his bar mitzvah while stoned and then meets with the venerable Rabbi Marshak (Alan Mandell) is the closest the film comes to an affirmation of the peace-and-love philosophy. For a moment, the wise old traditional sage and the baked young fan of The Jefferson Airplane share a similar goofy bleariness about the eyes with Peggy Olson, the rising career woman attempting to generate ideas on an equal footing with her male colleagues. There's an interesting verbal link too. Peggy's team stays on after hours to concoct cheery slogans for rum, a job where, as the season 1 tagline has it, "The truth lies." Marshak and Danny, by contrast, bond over the explicitly countercultural lyrics to "Somebody to Love," namely, "When the truth is found to be lies . . ." In their different ways, these characters improvise ad hoc narratives, cultural or countercultural, to replace broken traditional 1950s ways of life. Marshak lights on the bleakest phrases in the Airplane song as his gambit for connecting with Danny, without delving into the chorus, an anthemic precursor to the Summer of Love. Yet the song's affectionate sentiment provides the humane notion that mitigates the Coens' film. In plot terms, *A Serious Man* is terribly fatalistic, apparently confirming the assessment that life really is "all shit" and "lies." But Larry's goodness and fortitude are all the more touching, and perhaps even all the more credible, precisely because they would seem to be utterly ineffectual. For surely we presume that Danny will perish in the tornado moving implacably towards his school in the final shot of *A Serious Man*, and that if the twister doesn't get Larry then his newly diagnosed cancer will.

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"Come together," The Beatles sang in 1969, but that same year The Stooges, sending a message from Detroit, had started calling the bluff of the passing decade: "No fun to hang around . . . No fun to be alone." This alternative take on the feel-good decade fits *Mad Men* and *A Serious Man*, revisionist fictions that present distinct but overlapping counter-mythologies of the 1960s, rueful and scornful ripostes to Baby Boomer self-congratulation.

In *Mad Men*, historical events appear as direct and relevant forces. Characters witness and respond to the key events unfolding on television: Kennedy's election and assassination, Martin Luther King Jr.'s Freedom Walk, self-immolating Vietnamese monks. Special features on the season 3 DVD release include documentaries about murdered civil rights activist Medgar Evers and the history of cigarette advertising. (Don Draper is said to be based in part on Draper Daniels, who created the Marlboro Man campaign.) In the 1967 world depicted in *A Serious Man*, by contrast, we see the satirical television war comedy *F Troop*, but the escalating war in Vietnam gets no air time. This absence of history itself could be read not so much as a flaw than as a gap that forms an acid comment about the dreamlike detachment of Middle America from any consciousness of what's happening in the wider world. The counterculture, meanwhile, in the form of sex (a naked sunbathing neighbor), drugs (whether taken by adults or children), and rock'n'roll (as prepackaged by the Columbia Record Club), seeps through suburban life entirely disconnected from any political meaning.

These dramas debunk a rosy view of pre-'68 Americana, excavating a bedrock of depression and insincerity beneath the rhetoric of change and freedom. *Mad Men* is perhaps more thrilled with the era's frolicsome guilty pleasures, yet finally both works are fundamentally aligned with the scorn of a commentator like Joan Didion, to whom 1960s dreams of transformation seemed fatuous and dangerous. "That huge generation that believed it had the power to do anything," she bitingly remarked of the Boomers in television journalist Tom Brokaw's 2007 book *Boom! Personal Reflections on the '60s and Today* (Random House). If *Mad Men* predicts the channeling of such generational *esprit de corps* into the narcissism of consumer culture, *A Serious Man* invites a more cosmic rebuke about the nature of individual helplessness *tout court*. As Didion wrote in her blistering final note to "On the Morning After the Sixties" (1970), collected in *The White Album* (Simon and Schuster, 1979), "it would be less than honest to say that I expect to happen upon . . . a happy ending." In their 1970 protest song, "Chicago," Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young summoned up hope for a happy ending even in the face of violent unrest and political injustice. But the song's refrain—"we can change the world"—contains a notion that *Mad Men* and *A Serious Man*, fictions for a less hopeful time, resolutely refuse.

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ABSTRACT Both the TV show *Mad Men* and the Coen brothers' black comedy feature, *A Serious Man*, are set in the 1960s and, this essay argues, depict the decade as a time of alienation and unhappiness, contrary to Baby Boomer myths and hippy wishful thinking.

KEYWORDS *Mad Men*, *A Serious Man*, Coen brothers, 1960s, TV drama

DVD DATA *Mad Men: Season Three*. Various directors. © 2009 Lions Gate Television Inc. Publisher: Lionsgate Home Entertainment. $49.98, 4 discs.

A Serious Man. Directors: Joel Coen, Ethan Coen. © 2009 Focus Features LLC. Publisher: Universal Studios. $29.98, 1 disc.

PRE-WAR TRAUMA: HANEKE'S *THE WHITE RIBBON*

GARRETT STEWART ANALYZES HANEKE'S FILM AS A PARABLE OF SOCIAL BRUTALITY AND NATIONAL CRISIS

Technique is unsettling right from the start. A violent horse-riding injury in eerily digitized treatment cuts to the victim's child rushing with odd composure to the scene—as if she'd been waiting for it. From that point on in Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon*, the physical violence is mostly off-screen instead, with unsolved crimes involving beaten, maimed, or slain bodies intermittently disrupting, until gradually forgotten, the daily round of a small German village in the years leading up to—and beyond—World War I.

Crowding the frame, children are huddled everywhere in the wake of these passing disasters, too soon and too close for comfort: morose, secretive, unreadable. Are they the group perpetrators of the local atrocities? That's the question. And this is Haneke, so it's the wrong one. What we see, not so much by historical sample as by parable, is an entire generation in the making—emerged from a black-and-white Lutheran world that is captured in exacting period detail even as its costs are tallied on the brink of modernity. But it's hard not to feel that the film's conclusions, for all the dour beauty of execution, seem entirely foregone. Mounting details, intriguing in the intricate, cryptic fit of their sequencing, exquisitely shot and piercingly edited, tell a crushingly familiar tale: the private ferment of German national violence in the oppressions of domestic hierarchy.

Haneke's 2003 masterwork, *Caché* (*Hidden*), rests on a pervasive enigma similar to that of the village assaults in his new film, forcing us to wonder who is terrorizing the French TV host with invasive tapings of his private life. This is its own kind of false lead. The media personality must for the first time, and no matter by whom, be made not just to know himself seen but, in an inversion of moral paranoia, to see his whole world from the outside—both in its superficiality and in the checked guilt that bolsters it. That's the fable, conveyed by the rescanning of surveillance tapes in the "home theater" of bourgeois security. A rare Haneke film not to involve characters in an interface with the mediated screen image, *The White Ribbon* finds a different way to deflect its emphasis from detective plot toward parable. And, this time, crimes of reprisal are easier for us to pin on the coming-of-age children amid the sublimation by violence played out around them in different registers of cruelty, most often sexual—but with no TV to blame.

Absent all inset visual monitors, mediation in *The White Ribbon* takes a more diffused form, layered in a different way. It operates not only by means of a novelistic voiceover (by the town's former schoolmaster) but through a cinematography modeled closely, the director acknowledges, on August Sander's photos of a mostly interwar and already defeated German people, including many tense and staring children. Here is the heritage film with a vengeance, mediating for viewers almost a century later the preindustrial culture of a still agrarian world into which the modern war machine is about to storm. When war does come at the end, the voiceover has it that "everything was about to change forever"—partly because the pressure of violent enmity is about to go public, programmatic. This being Haneke, the right question isn't whether or how the children stand together in a sadistic cabal. We are led to ask, instead, what they stand for collectively in the ingrained character of such callous violence. With no local "solution" to the mysterious flare-ups of vicious spite, the contagion shifts register. Social pathology marks the path to National Socialism.

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

In nearly a hundred disjointed episodes, the story comes across like hacked diagnostic fragments on a dissecting table, cross-sections of a systemic malady. Stylistically, it is a return from the probing long takes of *Caché* or *Funny Games* (1997, 2007) toward the punctual cutaways in *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (1996) or *Code Unknown* (2000), where parallel montage takes the pulse of urban contin-

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Culture of punishment
The White Ribbon. © Films du Losange. Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

gency. In *The White Ribbon*, harrowing scenes of a more variable length—like morbid outbreaks as much as narrative incidents—are often linked by analogy if not direct causality (psychic violence here, corporal violence there). Stressed by editing's circumstantial evidence, sometimes who's done what to whom may seem deceptively clear at the time: the peasant son, for instance, is suspected to have abducted and whipped the landlord baron's child in revenge for the negligent working conditions that have led to his mother's death. Confirming this, one might think, is a whiplash cut from a scene in which his father, beholden as farm laborer to the baron, has twice slapped across the face the recalcitrant son for his upstart and unsubstantiated rage—a cut straight into the baron's irate question to his own son's tutor about the boy's disappearance, "What do you mean gone?" Class resentment surfaces in a doomed revolt against patriarchal cruelty and its feudal origins, leading to the apparent suicide of the peasant father over his lost favor with the baron. And if in the meantime the baron has publically exonerated the man's son (discovered to have been with his fiancée at the time of the attack), we may still assume that the retaliation has been carried out by proxy rather than coincidence.

Even when mysteries do coagulate, the plot never really thickens. Instead, symptoms proliferate, technique standing watch over each new breakdown of the village's moral immune system. In the earliest scene of familial violence, the camera is stationed down a hallway that evokes a prison corridor before execution. Brother and sister are to be beaten by their pastor father for being late for dinner. Having shut the door behind him, suddenly the culprit son opens it again and walks toward—and straight past—the tightly panning camera to enter a darkened room from which he returns with the needed cane. The victim is made instrumental in his own pain. Tracking the perversity of this ritual is the unnerving camerawork that follows him back to the parlor from the *other* side of his original trajectory, flattening the vicious circle of discipline to a disorienting two-way street. Coming toward us as one subject, a victim, he returns—along an alternate face of the same fateful route—as another subject, the weapon-bearer. The wrench to our optical point of view captures the emotional disjuncture of a shamed self turned against its own instincts, yet braced to get even. No rod will be spared.

Haneke's repeated insistence in interviews that his film is not an etiology of Nazism, probing instead the general origins of human evil, is made more difficult to accept when the narrator begins by saying, however diffidently, that the "strange events" to be reported might "perhaps clarify some things that happened in this country." And especially when the film's subtitle scrawls itself out in old-fashioned (and

Cycle of violence

The White Ribbon. © 2009 X Filme Creative Pool, Wega Film, Les Films du Losange, Lucky Red, ARD Degeto, Bayerischer Rundfunk, Österreichischer Rundfunk Fernsehen, France 3 Cinéma. DVD: Artificial Eye (U.K.).

never translated) script as "A German Children's Story." True, "clarify" (with or without "perhaps") catches the wrong tone. And certainly the diagnosis of parental coldness and returned filial malice has been the subject of almost all Haneke's films, a disconnect in family feeling that can turn poisonous, literally in the murder–suicides of *The Seventh Continent* (1989), figuratively in everything from *Benny's Video* (1992) to *Caché*. Yet the particular national context of *The White Ribbon* remains hard to deny, even as it intersects with much-debated psychohistorical claims about a homosocial youth culture that had grown up during World War I under the shadow of absent fathers at the front, later mutilated or dead on return, and broken households in the meantime, emaciated mothers too overwrought for nursing or nurture, with the lack of paternal identification further exacerbated by national humiliation in defeat.[1] All this, so the argument goes, bred a generational cohort vulnerable, after years of fear and impotence, to the mirage of racial superiority in the name of the restored Fatherland.

Haneke backdates the question not only historically, to the eve of World War I, but emotionally, to the family dynamic itself. In *The White Ribbon*, the problem is fatherhood, not its absence: an icy rancor fostered at the heart of patriarchal households. In this, the film's tacit social psychology comes more nearly into the orbit of explanations for Hitler centered on his own and his generation's corporal punishment in childhood, with its vindictive authoritarian backlash.[2] But if this is a large part of the film's ethical charge, its narrative works to distribute the banality of such evil across a mesh of oblique culpability until its depravities are not just isolated but generalized, turned from psychological wounding toward political ferocity.

The film takes its title from the symbolic ribbon that the sanctimonious pastor has his wife cut for their two eldest children to wear, as they had been made to do when younger: an insignia of "innocence" (like his clerical collar). What was once a "reminder" becomes a public stigma as well after they are now "purified" by beating—anticipating, perhaps, the black arm bands of the Hitler Youth as compensatory badges of domination. Yet the son's worst humiliation comes from the strips of white bedsheet that render his arms immobile in the name of nocturnal purity. Hence the sexual counterpoint

provided by a courtship plot between the schoolteacher and a local nanny, another familial norm in the making, whose fumbling celibate progress is finally stalled by her father's insistence on an extended engagement—from which we cut to a scene of more aggressive libidinal frustration. One curtailment of desire precipitates another until the explosion comes. For editing has shunted us from the couple's clasped-hand acceptance of postponed consummation to the bedroom torture chamber in which the pastor's boy is forcibly kept from solitary sex, released from his bonds only to watch a distant barn fire that he—or another of his youthful cadre—may have been involved in plotting.

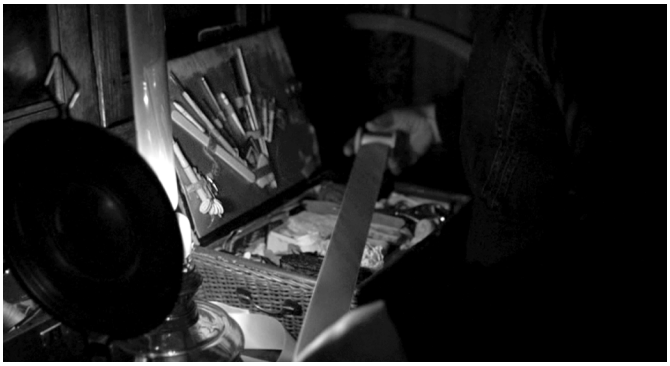
In a grueling scene that sets up this nocturnal ignition, a puritanical harangue is punctuated in a cut to equally joyless sex. Over many excruciating minutes, the minister goads his son into an admission of self-abuse. In the father's rhetoric, sex is an aggravated abrasion of the sacred body's "most sensitive nerves." In a scare story about another boy under the pastor's care, masturbation has led to exhaustion, pimples, and death. Caught in a double bind, the son and the viewer are equally cornered. When the boy begins to weep in embarrassment over his father's object lesson, he immediately has that flushed emotion used against him as proof of his nighttime degradation. Why, the father prods, did he react in that way to the story of the self-destroyer? "I don't know—because I felt sorry for him"—a sentimental ruse, perhaps, and one that would expose our own instinctive response to the pitiable scene as somehow inadequate, facile. Technique itself tells a harsher story, as we are thrust abruptly into the next episode, launched in mid-orgasm with the vicious widowed doctor finishing himself off, fully clothed, over the bent body of the local midwife.

There is no foreplay in Haneke's editing either, as we lunge from one burst pustule of humiliation and brutality to another. And when psychoanalytic paradigms emerge, as usual in his films, they are not in themselves determinant, but rather the trace of other social deformations. What matters here is not that the bound boy is symbolically castrated but that he is bound to take out this frustration elsewhere—and otherwise. Following this episode, a blatant Oedipal scenario is not so much explanatory, or even contributory, as figurative: a stand-in for all kinds of ruinous familial aggression. When the widowed doctor's motherless young son, missing his sister in the dead of night, eventually finds her in front of his father on the office examination table with her nightgown hitched up around her thighs, the whole malign tableau flares up out of a pitch-black screen. Haneke has explained in interviews how only a digitally enhanced saturation of his black tones (in the transfer from more sensitive color stock) permits the crisp definition of his night scenes. In this most gothically staged of them, and across the seamlessness of a single roving shot, the transitional blackout eschewed by his antiseptically sharp editing has instead been embedded within the continuous frame itself. Exposed to view as the door slices open the blackness, the sister scrambles to explain that "father has pierced my earlobes" (just routine familial surgery) so that she can wear her dead mother's earrings. The previous holes had "grown back," she thinks to add, and her brother wonders whether any of this "hurts"—while the nervous patriarch, discreetly zipping himself up in front of his instrument cart, offers the sweaty quip, "You have to suffer for beauty."

If this incestuous primal scene skirts cliché in the reduction of all bad parentage to child abuse, that's exactly what, in a general sense, the film implies. But the force of this inference seems, yet again, more social and political than narrowly psychoanalytic, as editing in itself serves to suggest in offering an immediate and alternate analogue of domestic violation. The link is forged by jump-cut. Hinting that some noncosmetic lesions never heal over, plot now leaps to the filial revenge of another humiliated girl, equally grotesque and sadistic in its own way, as we cut from the boy's tear-streaked stare at his father fiddling with his medical tools to the pastor's disheveled daughter in her own nightgown, groping for scissors in his office drawer and then reaching into his birdcage as the new scene breaks off. Oblivious for the first time to what the spectator sees during his voiceover, the schoolmaster's retrospect speaks only of the village's concern for the girl in her "weakened and feverish" state—after she has fainted in the schoolroom from her father's public chastisements. But what we alone see explains what the pastor must guess when he later finds the body of his pet bird stabbed through in a travesty of crucifixion. No wonder, two scenes later, that he delays at the altar, before his staring daughter, in offering the confirmation wine: "blood of the New Testament, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." The Protestant ritual, absolution without confession, has become a whitewashing.

In that preceding disjoin between unspied-on privacy and voiceover chronicle, we have been reminded how completely the scenes of domestic menace have lain beyond the ken of the teacher, narrated only by the camera in the long intervals between his summary bridge passages. The foregrounding of this now, by overt mismatch, seems timed for the venting of conjectures for which he does indeed have less ocular proof than we do. And since the minister by now suspects what his own household rigor has spawned, the denial to come plays out as nervous

THE RIBBON'S ALLEGORICAL LOOP



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cover-up—the teacher's hints met with muted panic, feigned outrage, and direct threats.

HISTORY ON THE HORIZON

Just before this, another false scent becomes a true lead in the ironies of the finale. We have previously cut in liturgical mid-sentence from the confirmation ritual straight to the most heinous crime of all, a blood shed without forgiveness in the mutilated eyes of the midwife's mentally disabled child. With this additional foreboding not only of arbitrary scapegoating but of racial cleansing and eugenics, once again we may sense the incubation of Nazi barbarity in childhood trauma. It is here that the final misleading surmise (and genre sidetrack) is introduced, when one of the children tells the schoolteacher, in advance of the stabbing, that she has dreamed about something terrible happening to the "retarded boy."

When the worst does happen to him, the teacher turns the self-announced clairvoyant in to the police, and in the second scene of merciless badgering rather than tuition in the schoolroom setting (following the fainting fit of the pastor's hectored daughter), the detectives try browbeating the girl into denying her story. She won't. So what do we make of her claim: second sight, magic omen, or, as they all think, a mere guilty slip about a perhaps overheard and repressed conspiracy? In raising this question, the film calls to mind the structural definition of "the fantastic" as operating only when you can't tell if abnormal events are psychological anomalies or supernatural interventions.[3] Recoding such events in other terms, as in the mode of fable, suspends or cancels the fantastic genre as such. The explanatory crisis is forestalled and transcended in a new key when enigmas signify beyond themselves. If *Caché* is not about inexplicably hidden video cameras but about seeing the whole edifice of bourgeois life through the eyes of the other, then the mediated images mean something else than unaccountable surveillance. Conundrum translates through irony to parable. *The White Ribbon*, too, takes the final, if only faintly tantalizing, twist of the whodunit plot, the question of second sight, and shifts it to a different level of premonition. The aberration isn't *unheimlich* at all, but homebred—and then, in turn, endemic in its national ramifications. For on the historical as well as psychological plane, the story is indeed about one's worst nightmares coming true.

Prompted by that dubious dream, when the teacher begins tentatively airing his suspicions to the minister in his study, the paterfamilias quickly shuts windows and curtains to closet what he senses coming. He then displaces the content of the violence onto the form of the accusation itself, calling it a "stooping to aberrations" both "monstrous" and "repulsive"—and adding (in a line of stinging ricochet): "It's obvious you don't have children!" He ends by threatening the teacher himself with prison if he goes public with these "criminal" charges. As with the recovered boyhood meanness of *Caché* as well, and again resonating with a coming national and racial violence, certain defensive cruelties may be all too human; the deeper crime is the refusal of all responsibility, breeding ground of worse. With the schoolmaster keeping things to himself to escape reprisal, and thus indirectly summoning the twin specters of appeasement and denial in the rise of fascist terror, we next enter upon a montage logic of distancing per se.

The whole scrupulously framed sequence to follow offers a kind of coda to the half-hearted detective plot. The official quest for answers has come to a head only when it's too late to expect them in the festering spread of persecution. The vilest of the characters and the most unjustly violated—the bitter physician and the midwife's son, whom he is last seen treating in the bandaging of injured eyes—disappear from the scene as its final mystery, even while an allegorical loop is knotted tight: the white ribbon going from reminder to scourge to shackle to blindfold. Once overt sadism and its symbolic victim are subtracted from the sociological equation, we are left with only the residual murk of perverse complicities: the inferred banding together, ribbons or not, of victims as predators in the fierce circuit of abjection and revenge that by now seems projected from disparate enigmatic miseries to the temper of an intrinsic communal brutality. Disjunctive lurches from one scene of vindictiveness to another have built in this way toward a diffusive violence rampant and depsychologized.

By this point even the camera stands back. Across the telescoped gaps of three separate shots almost photographic in their stillness—retreating from the crumbling church tower along the main axis of the village street—the narrator's hasty replay of further gossip about the unsolved crimes shifts to the declarations of war that convene the populace back again on the inside of the church. The war is about to arrive as both a distraction from the teacher's suspicions and their objective correlative writ large. Recalling the busy and underdefined last frame of *Caché*, the final gathering at "solemn service" transpires in a prolonged shot from the point of view of an empty pulpit, with the still rushed voiceover—after noting that the minister has never pursued his threats—anticipating instead the narrator's own imminent army draft and eventual marriage. Before the pastor finally enters downstairs—as if to assume his place in the dock rather than a pew—the schoolmaster himself has appeared upstairs to direct the children's singing.

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Here at last the embodied choric voice of the film's own narration stands forth in his internal role as choirmaster: a figure marginal in its upper corner, yet still facilitating not only the known hypocrisy of the children's hymn but the strength they draw from raising their voices in public. We've in fact seen this authorized group formation of the otherwise malevolent ensemble once before in this space, with the two white ribbons prominently worn by the minister's children. But the difference is pointed. Again frame, scale, and distance turn camerawork to irony. Originally, the congregated singers had filled the frame in a separate balcony shot, cut to from the assembly downstairs at just the point where the voiceover explains how previous accusations about the sources of local violence have proven "untenable." Hold, therefore, on the children. By the wider final shot, however, this youth cohort is subsumed to the bigger communal picture.

At which point of no return, another technical departure for Haneke—beyond the voiceover, the period setting, and the black-and-white treatment new to his feature films—takes its symbolic toll. For *The White Ribbon* entails the first strategic use of dissolve in his relentlessly quick-cut, razor-edged editing. The effect brackets the narrative in two thirty-second transitions, first a gradual fade-in and then an answering fade-out. The film whose opening shot seems dredged up, as if dimly and resistantly, from the black background of memory, speculation, and denial ends symmetrically in a literal foreshadowing, dissolving separate perplexities into national disgrace, the baffling into the unspeakable. "I never saw any of the villagers again," and neither do we. In part as an emblem of this, the frame has all the while been surrendering their image lugubriously—irreversibly—as the white-on-black ribbon of exposed film runs out toward cinematography's own version of a darkness at noon.

Even less obtrusive editing than the final blackout can accrue to a kind of montage figure. Now and then the confines of the film's stultifying human world have been broken open by fixed-shot landscapes of the mercifully unpeopled countryside, more Malick than Haneke. But these are no relief either, since it is history itself that looms at their vanishing point, mass death in the offing. Symmetrical rhyming shots are subsumed in this way to the measure of the inevitable. In matching captures of the same minimal vista, sparest of all, at the end of these quick-cut sequences, we notice two trees edged to the left of the framed horizon: first in the "blinding" white of the last peacetime winter, then again as the calendar rolls round toward fruition and war. But there the immediately preceding shot of unwaving grain is clearly a long-held photographic insert, unable otherwise to stop time before the winds of change agitate the wheat fields in the capping frame. In this summoned archetypal inflection of rural life, *The White Ribbon* turns even the cycles of vegetation to parable, with the grimmest of harvests soon to commence. The narrator has earlier literalized an idiom by saying that the children "pitched in" at a July hay-baling, where the community, in that annual labor, forgets the unexplained violence that has plagued its days. But in those later uninhabited shots of frozen and then fallow lands, history silences mystery. They, or their like, will soon be killing fields.

Return to darkness

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1. Peter Loewenberg, "The Psychohistorical Origins of the Nazi Youth Cohort," *American Historical Review* 76 (1971), 1457–1502.

2. See especially the book by Polish-born, Swiss-based psychologist Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-rearing and the Roots of Violence* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983), trans. Hildegard and Hunter Hannum, a bestseller in German as well as English editions in the decade before Haneke first conceived the idea for his film, which was then long-deferred in scripting and production.

3. The classic statement of the case is Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), where the defining genre tension between "the uncanny" and "the marvelous" is shown to collapse under the imposition of an allegorical grid, which turns mysterious events to metaphors of something else. For Todorov, this is not just a parallel interpretive track but an absolute negation of the genre's founding "duration of uncertainty."

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ABSTRACT The surgical rigor of Haneke's *The White Ribbon* lays bare the underlying brutality of family life in a German village, microcosm of a social order whose strictures and class resentments fester on the eve of WWI. Punishment, abuse, and humiliation tighten a mysterious web of spite and reprisal among the local children, with national history waiting ominously in the wings.

KEYWORDS Michael Haneke, *The White Ribbon*, Nazi cinema, German cinema, allegory and cinema

CREDITS *Das weisse Band: Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte*. Director, writer: Michael Haneke. Producers: Stefan Arndt, Veit Heiduschka, Michael Katz, Margaret Ménégoz, Andrea Occhipinti. Cinematographer: Christian Berger. Editor: Monika Willi. © 2009 X Filme Creative Pool, Wega Film, Les Films du Losange, Lucky Red, ARD Degeto, Bayerischer Rundfunk, Österreichischer Rundfunk Fernsehen, France 3 Cinéma.

ABERRATIONS OF BEAUTY: VIOLENCE AND CINEMATIC RESISTANCE IN HANEKE'S *THE WHITE RIBBON*

JAMES S. WILLIAMS ARGUES THAT SOUNDTRACK AND EDITING COMPLICATE A NARRATIVE OF CRUELTY

The White Ribbon (2009) would appear to begin where Haneke's previous film, *Caché* (*Hidden*, 2005), left us: with the question of the potential of children to be either innocent and a force for future good, or guilty of collusion and set to replicate the sins of their fathers.[1] Accordingly, *The White Ribbon* has been largely received as a parable about the effects of suppression, starting with brutal, ritualistic punishment in the home and extending to corruption within a rural, north German Protestant village on the eve of World War I. Eichwald is beset by mysterious and apparently random events, many violent, some lethal, all with a sadomasochistic undertow of revenge. The narrative voiceover (the first such instance in Haneke's cinema) encourages us from the outset to look for premonitions of National Socialism. What we are about to witness "may perhaps clarify some of the things that happened in this country," the elderly narrator (Ernst Jacobi) suggests. His disarming admission that what he is telling us may be based at times on rumor and hearsay is clearly meant to persuade us of his honorable intentions. Expressionless, seemingly detached, always earnest, he chatters on for 143 minutes in the full confidence that he will emerge remarkably well from this terrible tale. For in addition to his patient cataloguing of strange atrocities that he presents himself as actively trying to uncover and prevent, he pursues another more tender, lyrical, and personal narrative: that of his own presence in the village as a naïve and winsome thirty-one-year-old schoolteacher (Christian Friedel) and his shy courtship of the seventeen-year-old Eva (Leonie Benesch), new nanny for the local baron's children.

The exact identity of the perpetrator(s) is never revealed, although the cinematic frame is flush with the faces of young children and early teenagers roving around morosely in packs with the camera trained at their eye-level. It is implied that they are retaliating against their hypocritical educators, who preach absolute ideals which they fail to live by themselves. Yet the mature narrator never spells this out, just as he chooses never to criticize or doubt his younger self. After having been shown the door by the pastor (Burghart Klaussner) for voicing suspicions about the latter's children, he briefly recalls at the end the outbreak of war, his conscription, marriage to Eva, taking on his father's business, and the fact that he never saw any of the villagers again. We will thus never know the reasons for the sudden disappearance of four key characters: the doctor (Rainer Bock), his daughter Anna (Roxane Duran), his son Rudi (Miljan Chatelain), the midwife (Susanne Lothar), and her young child Karli (Eddy Grahl), a Down Syndrome sufferer. Likewise, the mystery of what one needs to repress in the past to account for where one is in the present (a question formalized by Haneke in an interview included on the DVD of *Caché*) is left unanswered. What actions, we may wonder, were committed by the narrator to ensure his own survival through two world wars up to the indeterminate present moment of his narration? On this specific point, along with the more general question of how individual moral discipline can lead ultimately to state fanaticism, he remains glaringly silent.

For all its thematic consistency with the rest of Haneke's *oeuvre*, *The White Ribbon* stands out on account of its exceptional display of the plastic qualities of the image. Shot in pellucid monochrome, the film dazzles in its exact and rigorous mise-en-scène, meticulous compositions, and immaculately crafted, crisp cinematography by Christian Berger. The gray shadings of interiors appear so finely etched that when the action passes from interior to exterior into a bright outdoor scene the contrast is almost blinding. Haneke has acknowledged the influence of the great German photographer August Sander who specialized during the 1910s and 20s in brilliantly sharp, unembellished human portraiture, part of an ethnographic project to construct a "people of the twentieth century" (the captions he supplied draw on family and

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Rituals of obedience and shame
The White Ribbon. © Films du Losange. Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

social types, as does Haneke's film). Moreover, in comparison with almost all Haneke's previous work, *The White Ribbon* has a strangely classical feel, compounded by what is, for him, a brisk and highly efficient narrative pace.

The opening image, for example, a fade-in to a fixed frame that immediately captures the first criminal event (the doctor's horse tripping over a hidden wire) is dispatched within less than half a minute, directly followed by a lateral tracking shot of the midwife set later in time. In addition, there are an unusual number of extreme close-ups of faces counterpointed by long shots of the village, as well as an almost compulsive use of tight shot/reverse shot for all extended dialogues. Also evident during moments of particular tension are instances of subjective point of view usually studiously avoided by Haneke. Further, in contrast to films like *Caché* and *Code Unknown* (2000), which are built from long, slow, unedited takes, and interstitial blackouts that serve to undermine sequence and temporality, the action here appears to proceed in strictly linear fashion, however elliptical. By means of clear, "dry" editing, a regular rhythm of inversion of images and extremes is established, most obviously from outside to inside (the film oscillates between grainy interiors and farmland exteriors) but also from movement to stasis, fire to snow, suicide to sordid sex, creating the effect of a collage of shots that intensifies the contrasting blocks of color and shade and underlines the relentless cycle of violence.

It would be reasonable to assume that this distinctive style is another weapon in Haneke's armory of formal tricks used to manipulate the spectator. After all, most manifestations of beauty in his cinema are objects of suspicion and critique, from the clichéd tourist advert of a perfect Austria in *The Seventh Continent* (1989) to the repeated full-frame reproduction of a late Dürer watercolor imaging the apocalypse in *Time of the Wolf* (2003). *The Piano Teacher* (2001) links classical music to the themes of elitist culture, control, and repression in Vienna as they play out in the perverse behavior of the protagonist Erika. One of her favorite composers, on account of his being aware of "what it means to lose oneself before complete self-abandonment,"[2] is Franz Schubert, whose "Dried Roses" for flute and piano, rehearsed mechanically by the baroness (Ursina Laudi) and her son's tutor (Michael Kranz), provides one of the few musical distractions in *The White Ribbon* (the film possesses no soundtrack other than Lutheran hymns of moral subjugation like "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" and "Commit Thou All Thy Griefs," sung diegetically by the children's choir during the church scenes). The few wide-shot views of nature, such as the searingly beautiful images of pristine summer cornfields, are always mediated by the narrator's voiceover and should be

read as a form of pathetic fallacy, part of his nostalgic projection of the mood of young yearning and love. In an ironic nod to romantic Schubert clichés, the teacher first meets Eva after he has been fishing for trout.

It is through Schubert that *The White Ribbon* transports us back to Haneke's Austrian context with its still far from exorcized Nazi past and ongoing process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* ("coming to terms with the past"). We could perhaps link the white ribbon of the title—ironic symbol of innocence and shame tied by the pastor to his children's arms—to the red-white-red pattern of the Austrian flag with its connotations of violence, religious faith, and purity. Similarly, the ordered fields of ripe wheat might be thought to invoke a fascist visual aesthetic of the utopian agrarian idyll, as well as the nostalgic Heimat films popular in post-war Germany and Austria with their simple narratives of rural life. Yet Haneke is also working at a more subtle and universal level than this by exploring the potential of cinematic form to convey the capacity for resistance in human and historical experience.

FROM TABLEAU TO ECHO CHAMBER

There is something peculiarly haunted about the hyperstylized images of *The White Ribbon*. The camera often hugs unnervingly close behind the backs of its figures and at odd angles, reminiscent of a long modernist tradition of aesthetic "awkwardness" from Cocteau to Antonioni. Moreover, with the spectacular exception of the opening shot of the doctor's fall, we are consistently denied visual access to key moments and events (violent or otherwise) that have either happened just before, or take place just offscreen, or are simply cut short before they reach their culmination. Indeed, like much of Haneke's television work, such as his black-and-white version of Kafka's *The Castle* (1997), *The White Ribbon* refrains from the physical aggression of his recent films.[3] Instead, the cinematic frame would appear now merely to duplicate the recurring leitmotifs of entrapment—framed windows, doorways, hidden recesses, birdcages—in a literal mise-en-abyme. In fact, both interiors and landscapes are shot to look unnaturally static, the human drama unfolding in an eerily frozen, silent, almost embalmed universe underscored by the narrator's deadpan delivery. The claustrophobic, curtained interiors seem undisturbed by human disorder. Obscurity and invisibility subtend the frame, at times taking the form of a white void perceptible through the locked doors and windows in the middle far-distance, as if part of a stage set. Just as the film itself opens with a fade-in from silent black and closes with a fade-out into the same, so, too, the characters move out of the shadows into visibility only to return inexorably into the gloom.

What results, paradoxically, is a flattening out of visual contrast and subdued chiaroscuro such that the image becomes progressively more gray and matt, monotonous and uniform, almost generic, like the deliberately frontal presentation of children with their hard, unforgiving expressions. For although punctiliously realistic in design, the film's ultimate effect is strangely synthetic, betraying an elaborate process of digital post-production.[4] The lugubrious interiors and corridors may evoke Vermeer but they lack real depth of field. Similarly, the exterior, tableau-like images present an increasingly abstract background, whether of trees or fields of crops, such that details are lost. For instance, a series of three brilliant white and increasingly sublime snowscapes in quick succession is gradually emptied of form, the horizon broken only by the profile of two skeletal trees. In the case of the funeral procession for the farmer, a significant detail—the identity of the figure refusing to shake the hand of the eldest son who joins the procession in the distance—becomes a matter of pure guesswork.

Indeed, as the film records the after-effects of each malicious act, its taut, spectral canvases, Dürer-like in their glacial, clinical dissection of reality, take on a melancholic pallor as if sucked of their very lifeblood. This produces odd, enigmatic inserts such as a window frame reflected ethereally onto a wall in slanted silhouette seconds before the cataclysmic barn fire. The sense that beauty is doomed here is directly articulated by the doctor who, after having been surprised by his young son Rudi in a compromising position with his fourteen-year-old daughter Anna, explains matter-of-factly in what is one of the film's most unsettling phrases: "You have to suffer for beauty—isn't that what they say?" Unsurprisingly, it is that most pretty of domestic birds, a parakeet, born to sing and chirp, that is spreadeagled by scissors in a gesture of revenge by the pastor's daughter. The final composed tableau of the villagers gathering in church after war has been declared—a photographic elegy for the soon-to-be-slaughtered preceded by a series of three progressively long shots of the village church presided over by oppressive clouds—presents one last flattening out of the visual. By taking his place in a pew with the rest of the congregation, the pastor, who had literally battened down all the hatches when confronted by the schoolteacher, is firmly reduced to the same level of collective responsibility and guilt as his parishioners.

But this is only half the story, of course. For the kind of aesthetic depth associated with Haneke's intensive work on the grain and texture of the digital/analogue image in films like *Caché* has effectively been displaced to the soundtrack,

AWKWARD ANGLES, HAUNTED LANDSCAPES

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which resensitizes us to the full potential of sound, pitch, and volume. With the image increasingly reduced to a hollow surface, it records even more starkly, like an echo chamber, not only the rustling wind and hum of flies (sole markers of nature here) and the noises of everyday suffering like a baby crying, but also the piercing tones of persecution, the nuances of cruelty and hypocrisy, the intimations of potential violence taking place just off-screen, and the deafening silence of repression. Indeed, the viewer is formally positioned in a dialectics of sound and image to "hear" the raw, acoustic damage unleashed by the agents of violence who wish to "see" the sins of the father visited directly on other children and adults.

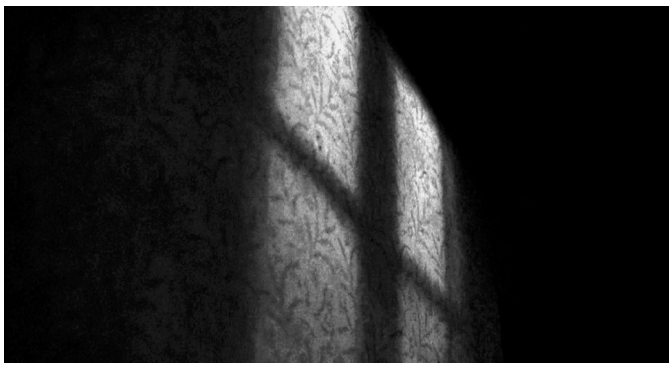
Hence, we may see almost nothing of the tortured body of Sigi (Fion Mutert) lying in the middle distance, but we hear in ear-splitting intensity the crockery that Rudi smashes to the ground off-screen after realizing that his sister and father had lied to him about his mother's disappearance. In the case of the scene between the steward (Josef Bierbichler) and his eldest son Georg (Enno Trebs), who stole Sigi's whistle, we witness the gesture of the father about to mete out punishment, yet the beating itself is unseen. What follows—the son openly defying his father by blowing the whistle and thus provoking further beating off-screen—suggests again the extent to which the terror of *The White Ribbon* is sonically expressed. For this reason, fear and dread operate on an arguably more internal and psychological level for the viewer.

The film's magnified, auditory *hors-champ* captures to blistering effect the diction of patriarchal speech act and the manipulation of language, to the point that almost every line of dialogue has the force of a command or damning interrogation. Particularly shocking are the levels of (self-)disgust reached verbally in one scene between the doctor and the midwife which ends with his demand: "Why don't you just die!" The reason for Klara (Maria-Victoria Dragus) suddenly fainting in the classroom, if not itself a ruse, is the humiliating diatribe directed against her exposed back by her intemperate father (he had minutes before dragged her by the ear to the back wall). It is surely significant, too, that Anna explains her activity with her father in aural terms, remarking to Rudi that she is having her earlobe repunctured in order to wear her dead mother's earrings. One of the most alarming images is that of Karli's battered eyes after his attack, yet even this is surpassed in horror by his agonizing attempt afterward to shout something (the identity of his attacker(s) perhaps?) while the doctor wraps his face in a bandage and all but smothers him. At this point in Haneke's project, sound, rather than the image, insists on the essential reality of violence: pain inflicted upon another.

THE ABERRATIONS OF MONTAGE

The White Ribbon presents thus a fascinating tension between sound and image, one that breaks down essentially into an opposition between the film and its narrator. This applies even during those rare moments when the narrator does not describe what we are seeing. One such instance occurs just before the beatings of Klara and Martin (Leonard Proxauf) by their father for returning home late. We are confronted with the symbolic closed door of the dining room in the far center of the frame and wait for the pastor to carry out the gruesome punishment. Except this does not happen. Instead, Martin comes out though the door and into the middle foreground of the frame. We then follow him as he collects the cane from a side room and steps in and out of frame as the camera loops around the corridor in what seems a slow and distended 360-degree turn. There is a hyperbolic falseness to this circular movement, as if this scene, which the narrator could never have witnessed, were a product of speculative overdrive on his part designed to show symbolically that the increasingly recalcitrant children are sealing their own fate.

In fact, all the extended, uninterrupted sequences in the film are codified in terms of the narrator's free-flowing desire or invention, beginning with his enraptured dancing with Eva at the harvest festival pictured in repeated 360-degree turns. An equally disorienting sequence is when the narrator shows how he scrupulously respected the wishes and honor of Eva while on a picnic trip. During a long, continuous take in the form of a backward-tracking shot, he first steers the carriage right and then draws it to a halt before turning toward her, an act she construes as a sexual advance and politely declines. He appears perplexed and orders the horse to move on, promising to turn back. But he continues in the same direction. She then motions for him to stop so that she can plant a tender kiss on his open lips. The implicit message here is that she is the initiator of desire, the active Eve to his passive Adam. Yet such a coy arc of visual excess, where time appears arrested and realism veers into the realm of personal myth, reads like a possible distortion of the truth. No resolution is provided, obliging us to view this and every slightest hint of inconsistency, however charming, as the narrator's desire to lead the viewer up the garden path. Hence our lingering doubts when the teacher suddenly offers to play the piano for Eva after she turns up at his door one night after being sacked by the baron. Music, the narrator would want us to believe, does not have to be either merely technique or a means of moral indoctrination, but can also provide immediate balm and respectful intimacy.



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Visions of death and retribution in an empty world

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The flagrant absence of editing in these cases is matched by those other moments in the film where the edit imposes itself explicitly and deliberately. I am thinking not only of those teasing moments of suspended action, as when we track the farmer's daughter, Frieda (Birgit Minichmayr), running anxiously through the village but are forced to wait until after the intercut caged-bird sequence between the pastor and his youngest son to discover where she is heading (a meeting with her assembled family). Far more problematic, yet also more potent, are those instances of formal disturbance and friction (or "aberration," to use the pastor's word describing the schoolmaster's "monstrous" accusation against his children) when the cut of montage is highlighted, lifting the film to a higher critical level and a reflection on violence. For example, the scene of the pastor berating Martin for masturbation and mercilessly reducing him to tears ("Be sincere!") is abruptly cut to a long shot of two indiscernible figures in the far background photographed from behind. We hear the brute sounds of sexual grunting and orgasm before the identities of the doctor and the midwife are revealed in a slow zoom. We are obliged by this temporarily confusing and provocative edit, where just for a second we are invited to imagine the worst, to consider precisely the links between different kinds of violent act (verbal, physical, mental) and their far-reaching implications.

Perhaps the most striking edit of all occurs when the film's underlying theme is spelt out overtly. From the scene of confirmation in the church, where the pastor hesitates before inserting the holy wine into his dejected daughter Klara mouth with the incantatory words, "This is the blood of the New Testament, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins," we pass suddenly, and without commentary, to the moment when Karli's tortured body is found in the undergrowth with a handwritten note attached. It is a passage from the Bible about the sins of the father being visited on the children to the third and fourth generation. The Christian message has been taken literally to grotesque ends. As we attempt to read the message conveyed in close-up, we also hear it being read aloud verbatim on the soundtrack. But, in another remarkable aberration, the voice is not the narrator's. Although we assume it to belong to one of the unidentified villagers who have found the boy, the speaker remains unseen, and, within seconds, the scene is peremptorily cut. In this series of quick-fire edits, which again draws directly on our imaginative faculties, the voice and authority of both the bullying pastor and the narrator have been supplanted by the hostile forces of the

Georg's defiance

The White Ribbon. © 2009 X Filme Creative Pool, Wega Film, Les Films du Losange, Lucky Red, ARD Degeto, Bayerischer Rundfunk, Österreichischer Rundfunk Fernsehen, France 3 Cinéma. DVD: Artificial Eye (U.K.).

unknown, opening up an ontological void in the narration equivalent to those moments of rupture we have experienced on the visual level.

Such calculated jolts of montage, whereby the film's surface is subjected to unexpected abrasions and the willed accidents of ironic juxtaposition, serve not only to transform the games of violence (including with the viewer) previously formulated in Haneke's cinema in primarily visual terms (the editor here is Monika Willi, who also worked on *The Piano Teacher* and 2007's *Funny Games U.S.*). More crucially, they also deflate and unbind, like threads of ribbon, the overdetermining, narcissistic master-narrative of the narrator whose neat allegorical frame, sealed at the end by the deadly church tableau, is exposed and decisively undermined by the intensive interplay of sound and image. This type of formal undercutting is, in fact, already announced in the opening credit sequence where, in total silence, and immediately below the main electronically formatted title, the subtitle "A German Children's Story" (left deliberately untranslated in all international versions of the film), comes gently into being on the screen, white on black, in the cursive form of Old German script. Rather than simply representing and replicating the stifling rigidity that breeds anonymous violence and unresolved fear, the film actively employs the always unique, disjunctive process of montage, so resisting the cycle of ritualized punishment and logic of doom.

It could even be argued that such a practice of montage not only throws into sharp relief but also extends the acts of disobedience by those disturbed children like Georg who, with their occasionally monstrous behavior, are struggling to find a voice with which to refuse the warped moral system into which they have been born. The film is not asking us to condone such acts but rather to understand that they represent perhaps the only means of individual expression and freedom available in such a repressive and collectively defined culture. Certainly, by privileging discordance and inconsistency, *The White Ribbon* confutes any teleological search for originary innocence or absolute truth—which, as we are made abundantly aware, causes only harm. In so doing, and despite initial impressions, the film ultimately divests itself of any claim to mastery or perfection, allowing us instead to view such delicate material objects as white ribbons not as symbolic marks of either purity or shame, but rather as manifestations of cinematic beauty in their own right, released from the internalized knots of repression and the perverted rhetoric of noble suffering. The film's complex beauty can thus be read as a form of resistance to absolutism and the order represented both by narrative and brutalizing morality. *The White Ribbon* is Haneke's most profound and challenging film yet.

1. The theme of ills being passed down from generation to generation propelled Haneke's much earlier *Lemmings* (1979), a feature-length television drama about his own generation that came of age in Austria after World War II and was formed by a morally rigid and punitive family regime. Part 1 ("Arcadia") concerns the sins of the fathers and mothers, part 2 ("Injuries") the harm caused by the parents' sexual repression and inability to express emotion, making them incapable of offering any effective guidance or vision to their own children.

2. Erika explicitly cites Adorno who wrote of Schubert's song cycles in terms that could just as easily be applied to the viewer's experience of *The White Ribbon*. For Adorno in "Schubert" (1928), the song cycles: "link up with poems in which again and again the images of death present themselves to the man who wanders among them as diminutively as Schubert in the *Dreimäderlhaus*. A stream, a mill and a dark desolate wintry landscape stretching away in the twilight of mock suns, timeless, as in a dream—these are hallmarks of the setting of Schubert's songs, with dried flowers for their monumental ornament."

3. Haneke explains in an interview featured on the 2010 Artificial Eye DVD edition of *The White Ribbon* that the film was, in fact, conceived at one point as a television film in three parts. Eventually he decided on a three-hour film for the cinema which, for commercial reasons, was reduced by almost forty minutes with the aid of veteran scriptwriter Jean-Claude Carrière.

4. According to Haneke in an interview with Michel Cieutat and Philippe Rouyer in *Positif* 584 (October 2009), 14–21, the film was initially shot in natural light on 35mm in color, then transferred to digital intermediate for extensive processing (including over sixty special effects), before being retransferred to 35 mm black-and-white for commercial release.

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ABSTRACT This essay analyzes Michael Haneke's new film *The White Ribbon* (2009), focusing on its exceptional plastic qualities and intensive use of sound. It is argued that an ironic, disjunctive practice of montage exposes and resists the narrative of ritualized punishment, thereby transforming the "games" of violence previously rendered in Haneke's cinema in primarily visual terms.

KEYWORDS Haneke, *The White Ribbon*, screen violence, film sound, montage

CREDITS *Das weisse Band: Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte.* Director, writer: Michael Haneke. Producers: Stefan Arndt, Veit Heiduschka, Michael Katz, Margaret Ménégoz, Andrea Occhipinti. Cinematographer: Christian Berger. Editor: Monika Willi. ©2009 X Filme Creative Pool, Wega Film, Les Films du Losange, Lucky Red, ARD Degeto, Bayerischer Rundfunk, Österreichischer Rundfunk Fernsehen, France 3 Cinéma.

SOUTH BY SOUTHWEST, 2010

The typical challenge of any film festival report is to create a fictional narrative out of thin air, or a meaningful proposition out of chaos. And this becomes even harder in an era when layoffs of various film reviewers have coincided with a continuing erasure of any clear line separating criticism from advertising in most mainstream venues. The task isn't far removed from the sort of pretense routinely made by reviewers, myself included, who presume to write ten-best round-ups at year's end, overlooking the pre-selections already made by distributors and marketers and often arriving at unwarranted global conclusions based on the very finite sampling of what one has seen. This becomes only more obvious and arbitrary when it comes to generalizing about the handful of films one sees at a festival out of several dozens or hundreds, and then creating a narrative thread or some sort of thesis that can connect them all like beads on a string—a process that for me stands out in even greater relief since I retired from regular reviewing in early 2008.

South by Southwest in Austin, Texas, commonly known as SXSW, is a combined film festival and "interactive" media conference held for both cinephiles and film professionals, followed immediately by a music festival that's even bigger. With fond memories of my previous visits to the first two parts of this event as a guest in 2000, 2001, and 2005, when the turnouts were smaller, I went this year (March 11–19) at my own expense and found that everything had grown considerably, as well as haphazardly. The estimated attendance was at least 13,000 people, many of them students aggressively partying during their schools' spring break. This resulted in several long lines for customers, including me, who didn't always manage to get into the films (or even some of the panels), sometimes after waiting for as long as an hour.

But what kinds of films were we hoping to see? As for the kind of cinema favored at SXSW in the past, this was the festival where I first saw John Gianvito's *The Mad Songs of Fernanda Hussein* (2001)—still, for me, one of the key American independent features of the past decade. But no less characteristically, it's also the festival where I once shared a panel with a popular SXSW regular who proudly brandished his dislike of foreign films as a matter of general principle, reminding me of a high-school classmate in Alabama during the 1950s who once declared, "If English was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for me." More generally, the steady erosion of any coherent sense of what constitutes "independent cinema," ever since figures like Harvey Weinstein and festivals such as Sundance have co-opted the term for their own sales pitches, has been reflected in greater amounts of confusion over what belongs in a film festival and why. (Furthermore, various formulas and catchphrases such as "mumblecore" or "Indywood," even when they get uncritically adopted by academics, arguably deserve to be regarded as obfuscations by commercial intention rather than as legitimate genres or subgenres.)

By and large, some festivals exist to facilitate seeing certain films and some exist to facilitate selling them. (Sadly, in many respects, the Toronto International Film Festival has gradually mutated in recent years from the former *raison d'être* to the latter.) In its seventeenth edition, SXSW seemed stuck somewhere in between these possibilities. And it would be perilous to try to make any generalizations about the state of American independent cinema on the basis of what I saw, although perhaps the most enlightening panel I attended was an extended interview with David Gordon Green, who appears to have mastered the tricky business of navigating between studio and independent work without blurring his own understanding of which is which.

In effect, any two films seen in succession or in some proximity to one another are apt to create a dialectic and context of their own, implying their own critique *and* narrative in terms of this relativity. The first two features I saw at SXSW this year offered a case in point. Both are childish romps that were shown at the venerable Paramount (a former vaudeville house dating from 1915 on Austin's main street, Congress Avenue, a few blocks from the state capital) with all the pomp of Hollywood premieres, and both were set to open commercially not long afterward. Neither qualifies even remotely as a low-budget independent effort, American or otherwise, and both were clearly shown to help launch their subsequent commercial runs. Frankly, I wouldn't have made it to either movie if a local friend hadn't selected them, but part of the freedom of no longer being a professional reviewer has been the luxury of stepping outside my usual routines and biases. And considered together, Mathew Vaughn's *Kick-Ass* and Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Micmacs* (one of the very few subtitled films at the festival, and the only one I saw) provided a useful object lesson in how responsibly or irresponsibly revenge plots might be used in commercial releases.

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André Dussolier in *Micmacs*
© 2008 Bruno Calvi/Epithète Films, Tapioca Films. Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Revenge plots are for me an issue of more than academic interest because I doubt whether the invasion and occupation of Iraq could have been sold in the U.S. quite so readily and perfunctorily without the endless preparation afforded by so many kick-ass vengeance sagas. (In a similar fashion, I tend to think the *Star Wars* movies have also helped to pave the way for such foreign ventures by popularizing the notion of the supposedly "bloodless" war, perceived by the folks at home as if they were videogames.) Perhaps for this reason, I find it difficult to share the enthusiasm of colleagues who celebrate the audacity of Quentin Tarantino, at least since he's restricted himself to the same sort of simplistic revenge scenarios in his last four features (both parts of *Kill Bill*, *Death Proof*, and *Inglourious Basterds*) that have inspired and/or rationalized American bellicosity. But until recently, following these old-crank bents, I've been too simplistically assuming that revenge plots per se are the problem rather than a particular American form of them. Seeing *Kick-Ass* and *Micmacs* on successive nights made me realize my error.

The appropriately titled *Kick-Ass*, which I only lasted through less than half of, is a sort of feel-good, dismemberment-and-superhero farce derived from a comic book—with pride of place given to a disgruntled and vengeful former cop played by Nicolas Cage, his foul-mouthed and dismembering eleven-year-old superheroine daughter (Chloë Grace Moretz), and a teenage wimp (Aaron Johnson) who yearns for superhero status—that plainly works off some aspects of the Tarantino vengeance template. According to this formula, the conviction that the U.S. or the world (the two often perceived as interchangeable) is run by gangsters is cynically assumed as a root premise of the action without ever being forthrightly stated, and indiscriminate brutality is meted out for kicks that are justified only by moral pretexts rather than by moral positions of any kind. By striking contrast, the villains of *Micmacs*, including a delightful cartoon performance by André Dussollier, are cynical armaments dealers. This time the hero's motivations for retribution, as labyrinthine as in any Dumas novel, don't have to be satisfied by death or even by extreme violence, only by elaborate and widespread exposure and humiliation of the villains via YouTube—with special emphasis given to their crimes in the Middle East. After the screening, Jeunet said onstage to local fan-boy celebrity Harry Knowles that his main narrative inspiration was *Once Upon a Time in the West*, which deeply impressed him as a teenager. But this postmodernist conceit seemed as improbable to me as Knowles's own suggestion that Jeunet's art should be coupled with that of Chaplin and Keaton. And even a superficial comparison of Leone's epic violence with Jeunet's whimsical slapstick and Rube Goldberg gag constructions already suggests at the very least a second-degree influence of silent comedy; he's far closer to the look and feel of Louis Malle's version of Raymond Queneau (especially as it's upgraded by William Klein's wide-angle grotesquerie) in *Zazie*

dans le métro. And the heroes of *Micmacs*—eccentric societal rejects (including a contortionist played by Julie Ferrier and an uncredited Russian woman, who are digitally combined) banded together as underground Parisian junk dealers, quite unlike the middle-class vengeance-driven superheroes of *Kick-Ass*—are ultimately more interested in justice than in retribution. The difference was salutary and, for me, revealing, making me realize that unthinking revenge and revenge as an art form may be interchangeable for Tarantino; but for Vaughn and Jeunet they are worlds and ideologies apart.

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All the other films I saw in Austin were genuine low-budget independent efforts, most of them shown on the various screens of two popular multiplexes, both of them known as the Alamo, that serve meals and alcohol on long counters located in front of the rows of seats in all their auditoriums. Waiters creep by periodically and quietly to accept the clients' written orders, serve them, and even deliver bills and change while the films are still playing, so that two forms of consumption are unfolding concurrently. But one can become aware of a discrepancy, or a conflict of interest, if one wants to walk out of a movie after ordering food or a drink.

Among the pure fiction films that I saw, the most promising and absorbing was Joseph Infantolino's deftly written and acted *Helena from the Wedding*, a comedy drama which plants a playwright and his newlywed wife and a few other couples and friends in a small mountain cabin in New York for a weekend to celebrate the new year, leading to various forms of disassembly, tension, and potential regroupings. But not surprisingly, most of the better items I saw in Austin were either documentaries or fiction films informed by documentary. The first batch included *When I Rise*, Mat Hames's documentary tribute to Barbara Smith Conrad, an African American opera singer who hailed from East Texas, attended the University of Texas (in Austin), and, in 1957, was forced by members of the state legislature to bow out of a campus production of *Dido and Aenas* in which

Keep Dancing
Courtesy of SXSW.

Putty Hill
Courtesy of SXSW.

she was set to costar with a white male, which ultimately led to Harry Belafonte sponsoring her singing career in New York. Last year, a half-century later, the Texas state legislature publicly apologized to her, and because the University of Texas produced this feel-good but informative and carefully researched film, it seemed natural that a local premiere, with Conrad in attendance, was another high-profile event destined to play at the Paramount. Other straight documentaries included the delightful short, *Keep Dancing*, about ninety-year-old dancers and choreographers Marge Champion and Donald Saddler and their new New York studio, shown together with *NY Export: Opus Jazz*, a resourceful restaging of Jerome Robbins's 1958 ballet in diverse New York locations, and Matt Harlock and Paul Thomas's *American: The Bill Hicks Story*, about the political and personal development of an ambitious and troubled Texas-born stand-up comic who died of pancreatic cancer at thirty-two.

By far the best of the mixtures of documentary and fiction that I saw was Matt Porterfield's mainly fictional and beautifully shot second feature, *Putty Hill*, about teenagers in working-class Baltimore. Working without a script, Porterfield's slim, long-take narrative about various friends and acquaintances gathering for the funeral of a friend who died of a drug overdose effectively incorporates interviews with the actors in the same settings, whose own identities clearly overlap at various points with those of their characters. I haven't yet caught up with Porterfield's previous feature, *Hamilton* (2006), which employs a similar mix of strategies, but it seems to me that he's onto something fruitful. At least to my own taste, what generally defines "cutting-edge" in new cinema of any kind—from Godard to Pedro Costa, from Cassavetes to Albert Brooks, or from Michael Snow to Jia Zhang-ke—usually entails some interaction between fiction and nonfiction that ultimately challenges the firmness of both categories.

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ANNIVERSARY BLUES

The author Elmore Leonard recently published ten rules for aspiring novelists. Top of the list was: "Never open a book with weather." It's an injunction that might also apply to writers of festival reports, but in the case of this year's Berlin International Film Festival (February 10–20, 2010), the temptation is too strong to resist. During the six days that I attended the sixtieth edition of the Berlinale, there were regular snow showers and the freezing conditions left a sheen of ice on the pavements between the handful of cinemas at Potsdamer Platz, the unlovely central business and shopping complex where the festival's main venues are located. This made rushing between cinemas—a necessity given the clockwork timing and crowded schedules—a treacherous business. Midway during the event, *Screen International* reported that a delegate from India had to return home, having slipped and broken his leg on an icy patch, and indeed this correspondent was distressed to see many of his fellow moviegoers topple to the ground, still clutching onto their festival shoulder bags and dignity.

Such conditions are a seasonal inevitability, but Berlin's February slot shortly brings with it other hazards. Notwithstanding the inclusion in competition of Noah Baumbach's *Greenberg*, a comedy with Ben Stiller as a fortysomething slacker, the festival invariably loses out to Sundance (January 21–31), its younger but higher-profile U.S. rival, in the tussle to secure challenging, independent-minded English-language cinema. Against a generally subdued background, a couple of films by British directors sparked excitement in Berlin: graffiti artist Banksy's debut, *No Exit through the Gift Shop* (for the carefully stage-managed non-appearance of its director at a press conference), and Michael Winterbottom's *The Killer Inside Me* (for its brutal violence). But both of these films had already premiered in Utah.

Recent years have seen festival director Dieter Kosslick attacked for relying too heavily on Hollywood celebrity to lend the festival some red-carpet heat. Celebrating its anniversary, the Berlinale might at least be forgiven for importing some glitz this year, but the criticism seems to have cowed Kosslick. Leonardio DiCaprio attended the world premiere of Martin Scorsese's silly thriller *Shutter Island*, but for the most part this was a festival free of star frippery.

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Roman Polanski
The Ghost Writer. Courtesy of Optimum Releasing.

Even the one big-name auteur in competition stayed away: *The Ghost Writer*'s Roman Polanski. Releasing a statement on winning the Silver Bear for best director, Polanski admitted he would have liked to attend, but the last time he went to a festival to receive an honor he ended up being arrested. One might be tempted to view the award as a rather dubious sympathy vote to the veteran but Polanski definitely deserved to win, displaying considerable artistry in his handling of the film—about another legally harassed figure, a fictional British prime minister who responds defiantly to allegations of war crimes.

Given these somewhat unfavorable circumstances, how then did Berlin define itself this year? It makes sense to begin with the winner of the top prize in competition, the Golden Bear. The final part of Turkish director Semih Kaplanoglu's loosely autobiographical trilogy (after *Egg* and *Milk*), *Honey* is a handsomely mounted account of six-year-old Yusuf's childhood in a remote mountain forest in the Rize province of northern Turkey. Struggling with lessons in his one-room primary school, partly because of a bad stutter, the boy falls mute following the disappearance of his father, a beekeeper who collects honey from treetop hives deep in the forest. Finding a luxuriant mystery in the dark corners of Yusuf's family home, where he shares strained meals in silence with his mother, and in the shadowy woods into which they both go in search of his father, the film is made with elegant restraint; and there are revealing ethnographic insights into the isolated rural community depicted. But *Honey*'s minimalist plot and slow pace made for an emotionally unrewarding experience.

Caterpillar
© Wakamatsu Production Inc. Courtesy of Dissidenz International.

The kind of arthouse filmmaker who demands respect rather than affection from festival viewers, Kaplangolu's triumph at Berlin signals a festival whose competition choices were safe, tame, and underwhelming.

Even when the programmers flirted with more extreme material, the results tended to disappoint. Koji Wakamatsu's *Caterpillar* seemed primed to cause controversy. The film is set during the second Sino-Japanese war and sees the return to his home village of combat veteran Lieutenant Kurokawa. He has been horribly maimed, having lost both his arms and legs during the fighting, and his wife Shigeko must now take care of him. The grotesque nature of Kurokawa's injuries are repeatedly underlined by Wakamatsu's approach: he features close-ups of the horrified reactions of the soldier's relatives before a long reveal of his limbless lead actor in the film's pre-credit sequence. The blithe—sensationalist, even—way Wakamatsu turns physical disability into political metaphor (for Kurokawa's helpless state read Japan's emasculated military strength), an insensitivity that acquired a prurient edge in the many scenes of Kurokawa and Shigeko having sex, raised the hackles of some critics. But the film is too crude and heavy-handed to warrant serious offence: Wakamatsu's background is in exploitation cinema, and these roots were evident in the film's final-reel lurch into lurid melodrama.

Honey
Courtesy of Kaplan Film.

In its depiction of the mutilated figure of Kurokawa railing at the wife on whom he is now utterly dependent, *Caterpillar* concocts a rather obvious parable of diminished male power. Anxieties about traditional forms of masculinity were a strong theme of the program. The title of Aleksi Salmenpera's competition entry might stand as a summation: *Bad Family*. Several films in Berlin depicted vanishing paternal authority against a backdrop of convulsive family dynamics. A strained and lackluster social realist drama, Thomas Vinterberg's *Submarino* sought to lay part of the blame for the present troubles of two brothers in modern-day Copenhagen—one is caught up in violent crime, the other has a bad drug habit—on the dreadful parenting of their alcoholic mother. And in Iranian

director Rafi Pitt's politically daring, assured, but curiously uninvolving thriller, *The Hunter*, a devoted father turns cop-killer to avenge the death of his wife and daughter.

Bad Family was unusual in making this crisis of masculinity a cause for wry bemusement and deadpan enjoyment—and all the better as a result. Echoing the droll, precision-controlled comedy of its producer Aki Kaurismäki, writer–director Salmenpera's film revolves around Mikael, a middle-aged judge sharing a life of comfortable respectability with his second wife and teenage son Daniel from his former marriage. When his first wife dies—having been woken up, he greets the news with blank indifference—he invites his long-estranged daughter to move into their apartment too, and quickly suspects that the sibling intimacy that she and Daniel strike up has become incestuous. Made with a cruel and icy detachment, *Bad Family* superbly depicts Mikael's unsuccessful attempts to put a stop to the relationship. The film is about a younger generation's defiance of traditional values, but it is also a tragicomedy about the father's struggle to retain his authority. Ville Virtanen's performance hints at vulnerability behind Mikael's scowling mask, but, as expressed in Salmenpera's most resonant image—of the furiously intransigent middle-aged man pulling himself back and forth on a rowing machine that he keeps in his apartment—finally invites more mockery than sympathy.

The most interesting films in Berlin were to be found away from competition. None of the work in the Forum was quite so daring as the strand likes to advertise, but the sidebar's insistence on more experimental practice nonetheless made a bracing change. Sharon Lockhart's *Double Tide* was a highlight. From a fixed camera position, a female clam-digger is filmed working the Maine mudflats. *Double Tide* has only two shots, each lasting around forty-five minutes: the first at sunrise, the second at sunset. The film is, among other things, a study of the way labor can mark a landscape—the smooth surface of the mudflats is pockmarked by the digger's burrowing for clams and scored by the heavy sledge she drags behind her. But there's also a hypnotic thrill to surrendering to the durational demands of the movie, and to the play or tension between figurative documentary and pointillist abstraction (as the on-screen figure disappears into the grey misty distance of Lockhart's digital image). What's more, viewers who stayed till the end could make a joke about one of the closing credits: an editor is acknowledged for *Double Tide*'s single cut.

There were a couple of fine documentaries in Forum, too. Anat Yuta Zuria's *Black Bus* uses the increasingly widespread appearance of gender-segregated buses (men get to ride up front) in Tel Aviv to probe the difficult position of women in Israel's ultra-orthodox communities. The movie features some superb verité footage—during one bus journey, Zuria captures an argument over whether segregation can be justified according to Taludmic law. Tellingly, this dispute involves only the male passengers. Throughout, in sequences of subtle formal self-interrogation, Zuria shoots female passersby whose reluctance to be filmed stands for the wider invisibility of women in orthodox communities.

Day of the Sparrow
© 2010 Philip Scheffner/Pong. Photo: www.dayofthesparrow.de.

The issue of consent is one that needles away in watching Philip Scheffner's *Day of the Sparrow*. This ruminative, personal film essay explores Germany's military involvement in Afghanistan—and uses the refusal by the army to collaborate with documentary (relayed to us by the conversation Scheffner has with a public relations official) as a symbol of the state's reluctance to respond fully to public anxiety about its role in the Middle East. The film takes as its starting point a news story from 2005: a sparrow interrupted preparations for an attempt to build a record-breaking domino chain, triggering a premature tumble. The film goes on to unleash a cascade of ideas and issues, from Germany's treatment of political dissent and its reluctance to classify the military campaign overseas as a "war" to Scheffner's recollections of family holidays. *Day of the Sparrow* is flawed: driven by birdlike curiosity, Schneffer alights on this dizzying array of subjects, without imposing any coherence on them. But like *Black Bus*, it exhibits a degree of formal ambition and innovation that, if Berlin is to prosper beyond its sixtieth year, needs in the future to find expression elsewhere in the program.

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VORSCHNEIDER IN FOCUS

The sixtieth edition of the Berlin International Film Festival (February 10–20, 2010) was the occasion for yet another newly restored (and longer) version of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), premiered simultaneously in Berlin, Frankfurt, and on television. The film played on a giant screen before blanketed, huddled crowds at the Brandenburg Gate, Germany's most symbolic backdrop. Also looking back at the cinematic past, the critic David Thomson curated a retrospective program, *Play It Again . . .!*, which charted the great discoveries and controversies of the festival's decades at the center of Cold War cultural politics. Honorary Golden Bears for lifetime achievement were presented to representatives of both of Germany's post-war cinematic traditions: Wolfgang Kohlhaase, the east's most prolific screenwriter, and Hanna Schygulla, the actress most identified with the west's New German Cinema. The anniversary was also the pretext for looking forward. Sir Norman Foster, who designed the transparent cupola of the revamped Reichstag, was on hand to discuss the future of the urban movie theater. German and international stars provided just enough *Glanz* ("shine") to offset the drab, icy sidewalks of an unusually harsh winter (only the oldest visitors would remember that the Berlinale was a summer festival before 1978). From archival virtuosity and official histories to red-carpet capital and architectural visions, the message was clear: remember, but continue!

For journalists more interested in new releases, the high-profile events and retrospectives were less important than the festival's other strands: the main competition as well as the Panorama and Forum (where both risks and rewards are most common). It has to be said that I heard many critics express disappointment and even desperation at this year's offerings. "Have you seen anything good?" was asked in unusual insistence. But while on the run from the fake, the literal, the uncinematic—what Serge Daney once called "film which falls from your eyes" (*Sight and Sound*, July 1992)—I kept encountering interesting movies. Notable were three with cinematography by Reinhold Vorschneider (two of which deal with men released from prison): Angela Schanelec's *Orly*, Benjamin Heisenberg's *The Robber*, and Thomas Arslan's *In the Shadows*.

Vorschneider's cinematography is not new to major festivals. Working closely with Schanelec, Maria Speth, and Heisenberg, three key directors of the Berlin School, Germany's current new wave, his visual style has defined an aesthetic of observation and duration. Vorschneider excels at long takes; static, contemplative shots with an often handheld camera; subtle adjustments of focus; and gentle, sometimes imperceptible mobile framing that registers slight shifts in the relations between characters or between characters and the spaces they inhabit. One need only think of Schanelec's *Marseille* and *Afternoon*, Speth's *Madonnas*, and Heisenberg's *Sleeper*—films that train our attention and teach us to see and hear more acutely—to be reminded of the stylistic continuities that one cinematographer can bring to the work of several directors. In all of these films, the camera has a "didactic frame": viewers must pay unusually close attention. Frontal close-ups are avoided; actors are often filmed from the side or from behind at moments of emotional tension. Vorschneider does not simply follow the actors' bodies; his camera is rather one that observes a space that actors must enter and exit. Resisting classical conventions, the camera may or may not respond to the action before it.

The idea for *Orly*, set during a two-hour period at the Paris Orly Airport, emerged while Schanelec and Vorschneider, in town for the French release of *Marseille*, sat in the airport waiting for a flight to Berlin. The place—its spatial qualities, light, and social dynamics—was the film's own point of departure. *Orly* begins with a shot of a young woman (Maren Eggert, the star of *Marseille*) walking along a Parisian sidewalk. Street noise predominates as the camera pans, following her at a distance. After a cut, we see still photographs covering the walls of a domestic space. On the soundtrack a woman (the one we have just seen?) and a man (Josse De Pauw), whom we then see, are speaking on the phone. She has left him. The next scene shifts to the airport as a thirtysomething woman (Natacha Régnier) wanders through a crowd while talking on her cellphone. She is in focus in the background as people and objects temporarily obscure our view. In the next shot she is sitting, framed against the glass walls of the airport, next to a man (Bruno Todeschini) who is preoccupied with text messages. As the woman removes her jacket, she makes a comment about the heat. For a few moments minimally drawn strangers share a decontextualized intimacy. They speak candidly for a little while about their destinations, their professions, and their private lives.

By means of patient two-shots and impersonal long shots, Schanelec and Vorschneider establish an interplay between

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Orly
Courtesy of Films Boutique.

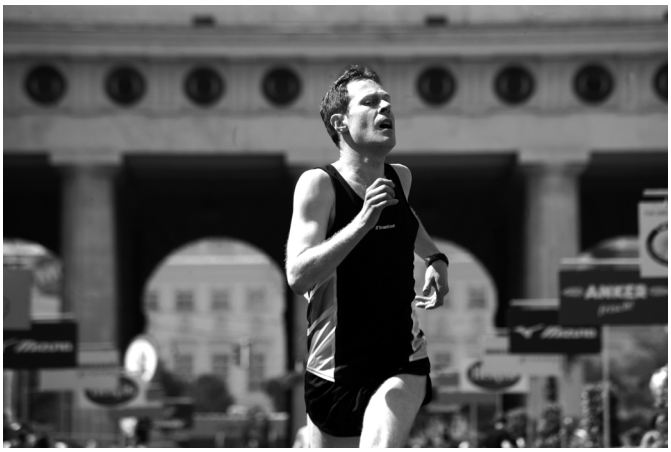
anonymity and proximity in the airport's spaces of transience. An example of this is the introduction of a mother (Mireille Perrier) and her teenage son (Emile Berling), both en route to the funeral of the boy's father. The boy is initially framed in a static long shot against shelves of cigarette boxes at a duty-free store. His lateral movement prompts a pan as he wanders into the alcohol section. The camera position is revealed to be in an adjacent waiting area as clusters of chairs become visible in the foreground. The camera's gaze, however, is not an embodied, psychologized one. We cannot attribute it to a specific character or point of view. Even a closer view of the boy in an entertainment store is filmed through a glass wall. When the boy joins his mother in a busy café, his back is to the camera. We must glance past several other tables to glimpse the back of his neck. Then the boy is shot from the front as his eyes follow the movements of the young waiter, who enters and exits the frame. As blurred bodies pass by in the foreground, the boy's fleeting reactions are temporarily blocked from view and from interpretation. Can we see enough, or do we know enough to make our assumptions, to construct a story? When, later, waiting at their gate, mother and son reveal secrets—her past affair, his homosexuality—their openness and the closer shot scale work in conjunction with the heightened background noise. The public space seems to offer a protective privacy for sudden confessions.

In a third plotline that loops back to the enigmatic beginning, a young German couple (Jirka Zett, the star of *Afternoon*, and Lina Falkner) sits in a crowded waiting area. They, too, are presented in two-shots of varying distances as each talks past the other banally. In line at a store the young man exchanges a glance with the woman from the film's opening. In a long shot of a crowded corridor, he walks abreast of her, as Cat Power's soulful cover of Otis Redding's "Remember Me" dominates the soundtrack (for Schanelec, an unusual nondiegetic intervention). The young man returns to his girlfriend, who reads him a humorous passage from her book, but his attention is elsewhere. At this moment there is an uncharacteristic zoom, one that sets the young man's disheveled angst and melancholic gaze just out of focus and just right of center. With the girlfriend in focus at the center of the frame and a father pacing with his baby in the foreground, Zett's face occupies a more impressionistic space, one of interiority and subjectivity, a nonverbal state between two registers of text (the song's English lyrics and the girlfriend's German). The young man's alienation in this audiovisual "space between" coincides with our heightened identification with him. Indeed, this is the closest we will get to a character in *Orly*. When his girlfriend asks him to photograph the baby, he says, "That's [too] penetrating." He walks into a crowd and stands at a distance, preferring to shoot from afar, using the camera monitor to achieve his own zoom-in. In the resulting image, he accidentally photographs Eggert's character. The young man is thus a surrogate for *Orly*'s cinematographer, both of them photographing a public space in such a way as to reveal the personal stories that briefly, but elusively, emerge there.

The film ends on an unexpected note of danger that weaves the different storylines together, but up until this point *Orly* (unlike the recent spate of perfectly integrated global thrillers such as *The International*, shown at last year's Berlinale—see my notebook in the summer 2009 issue) has established only the merest connections between its strands.

It is a film that explores the process of surmising, of not-quite-knowing the significance of small gestures and micro-dramas that enrich acts of waiting. To accomplish this exploration, Vorschneider's camera alternately stands close and steps back, revealing without being too penetrating.

In a festival program that abounded with prison and post-prison films (Florin Serban's glorious *If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle*, Rafi Pitts's interestingly flawed German–Iranian *The Hunter*, Hans Petter Moland's dark comedy *A Somewhat Gentle Man*, and Thomas Vinterberg's over-the-top redemption drama *Submarino*) or films that involve the captivity imposed by geographical remoteness (Alexei Popogrebsky's study of atmosphere and character in *How I Ended This Summer*) or religious ideology (Jasmila Zbanaic's *On the Path*), *The Robber* and *In the Shadows* stood out for their mixture of the Berlin School's emphasis on character study with action-oriented depictions of lone criminals on the run. *The Robber* is based on Martin Prinz's novel about Austrian serial bank robber (and marathon runner) Johann Kastenberger, whose crime spree was well documented in the media in the 1970s and 80s. Heisenberg's film presents Johann (Andreas Lust) as a figure caught between his private life as an amateur athlete and his masked criminal persona, obsessed with the physical challenge of fleeing each crime scene on foot. *The Robber* juxtaposes scenes between Johann and his girlfriend Erika (Franziska Weisz) and wordless scenes of running. The physical exertion demands a cinematographic mobility at odds with the stasis of Vorschneider's previous work and required the help of Steadicam operator Matthias Biber. The concluding chase, a drawn-out manhunt, a race that cannot be won, is a spectacle at odds with the quiet atmospherics of the more quotidian scenes. The film does not end until Johann ceases to move. Only then does the camera, trapped behind the swishing wipers of a windshield, recover its stillness.



The Robber
Courtesy of Nikolaus Geyrhalter Filmproduktion.

In the Shadows
Photo: Reinhold Vorschneider. Courtesy of Schramm Film.

In contrast to *The Robber*'s stunning incorporation of action elements into the Berlin School repertoire, *In the Shadows* brings an unusual sense of duration to the crime genre. The film opens with the sound of rain and a long shot of Berlin's Friedrichstrasse at dusk. Cars move through the street, their lights reflecting on the wet pavement, as Geir Jenssen's eerie score merges with the relentless, heavy patter. Several minutes pass until Trojan (Misel Maticevic) is introduced in medium close-up, staring out of a café window. There is no dialogue. He is only looking. The film, which Arslan admits is an homage (and one that had Berlinale critics crying out the name of Jean-Pierre Melville), is at its best at such moments. There is something impenetrable in Maticevic's face as Trojan silently registers the world, a new danger, or another character. Eventually he hides in a cabin in the woods, alone again. There is, however, no refuge, even in nature. Trojan's final run emphasizes neither speed nor the physicality of the hunt, but rather the poetic solitude of a man without options. In a long tracking shot through the greens and browns of a pine forest, his body is dwarfed by tree trunks that (like the anonymous travelers in *Orly*) momentarily block the protagonist from view. Vorschneider's camera remains distant and detached. The film's last twelve minutes are without dialogue as Trojan, stealing a car, simply drives.

These three films suggest that the Berlin School and its Austrian affiliates are extending their range to encompass art-house-inflected genre projects. Vorschneider's collaboration with the new auteurs of German-language cinema, though adaptable, consistently poses the cinematographic question of how to frame the subtle attributes of elusive, complex, ultimately irreducible beings, whether they be travelers in a crowded airport or wanted men on the run.

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VERTOV'S WORLD

"Soviet cinema is currently experiencing an unforgettable turning point," wrote Dziga Vertov in 1926, in an April 12 letter collected in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (University of California Press, 1984). Judging by the two short films, *A Sixth Part of the World* (1926) and *The Eleventh Year* (1928), Vertov was doing little more than stating the truth. *Man with a Movie Camera* would follow in 1929, with *Enthusiasm* and *Three Songs about Lenin* following in 1931 and 1934 respectively, before the creep of socialist realism put paid to much truly experimental cinema. This vital and fascinating new Vienna Film Museum edition of two of Vertov's most important middle-period films serves to remind us of just how astonishing cinema can be, and how inappropriate our usual cinematic categorizations—comedy, romance, documentary—are when it comes to directors (or "author leaders," as these films have it) like Vertov—whose vision, it should not be forgotten, cannot be easily disentangled from the work of Elizaveta Svilova, his wife and editor, and of Michail Kaufman, his brother and cameraman.

A Sixth Part of the World, whose title refers to the immense landmass of the Soviet Union, is a celebration of the people and the industry of the USSR. If that sounds either dull or propagandistic, it should be noted that it is most definitely not the former nor straightforwardly the latter. Vertov, whose ability to understand his own work far exceeds that of anyone else, described it in the following way during an August 17, 1926 interview for the *Kino* newspaper: "*A Sixth Part of the World* is more than a film, than what we have got used to understanding by the word 'film.' Whether it is a newsreel, a comedy, an artistic hit-film, *A Sixth Part of the World* is somewhere beyond the boundaries of these definitions; it is already the next stage after the concept of 'cinema' itself . . . Our slogan is: All citizens of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics from 10 to 100 years old must see this work. By the tenth anniversary of October there must not be a single Tungus who has not seen *A Sixth Part of the World*" (quoted in Barbara Wurm's essay in the DVD booklet). It is no coincidence that Vertov mentions the Tungus, an older name for one group of indigenous people of the Russian north, as, unlike much of the fiercely metropolitan *Man with a Movie Camera*, *A Sixth Part of the World* is an attempt to capture the diversity of Soviet peoples, as well as the variety of the nation's industry. The film is also a complicated critique of capitalism, and of the USSR's involvement with the global market (the film was completed just before the first of the five-year plans was introduced). By the time Vertov made *A Sixth Part of the World*, Lenin's New Economic Policy had been in operation for five years, and export to capitalist countries formed a central part of the Soviet economy. The somewhat unwieldy subtitle of the film, *A Kino-Eye Race around the USSR: Export and Import by the State Trading Organization of the USSR* reveals something of the complex geopolitics of Vertov's cinematic subject.

A Sixth Part of the World begins not with the USSR, however, but in the capitalist world. A German plane descends, eerily reminiscent of the opening shot of Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935). Men and women dance the foxtrot, while fancy bows at the back of silk dresses swish and a gramophone record rotates (a wind-up gramophone playing a Lenin speech will return later on board a ship picking up furs for export to the Leipzig fair). The scene cuts to a machine picking up metal with "Krupp," the name of the German steel manufacturers and the largest corporation in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, written on the side. A woman and a man smoke and drink tea. "More machines . . . and more . . . and even more," read the intertitles, as if shaking their head at a system rapaciously committing itself both to limitless production and to such cultural decadence. "But for the worker," we are told, "it is just as difficult." Capitalism is structurally unfair.

One striking feature of *A Sixth Part of the World*'s intertitles is that Vertov repeatedly uses "you" (both formal and familiar) in different ways throughout: the "you" of the member of the various ethnic groups of the USSR included in the footage, the "you" of the audience watching the film, but also the "you" of the Soviet Union as a political totality. To complicate things further, the camera apparently possesses an agency of its own: the phrase "I see" is particularly prevalent at the beginning of the film, where Vertov's kino-eye turns its critical gaze upon the negative dimensions of the capitalist world: "I see colonies," "slaves," it reports, as we see footage of black men and women picking crops under the stick-wielding direction of a colonial master. "Capital" (misleadingly subtitled as "the capital" throughout, one of the rare faults of this superb edition), the watcher slowly realizes, may

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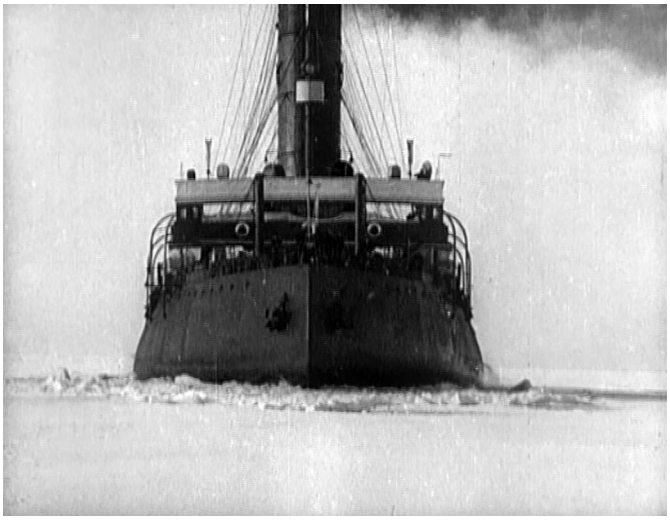
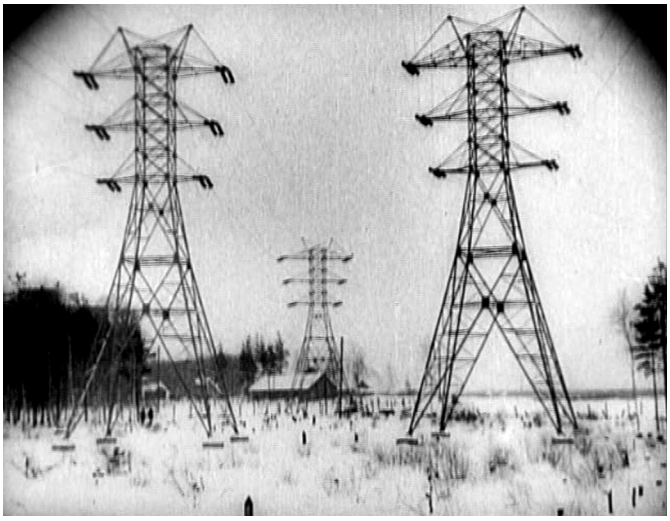
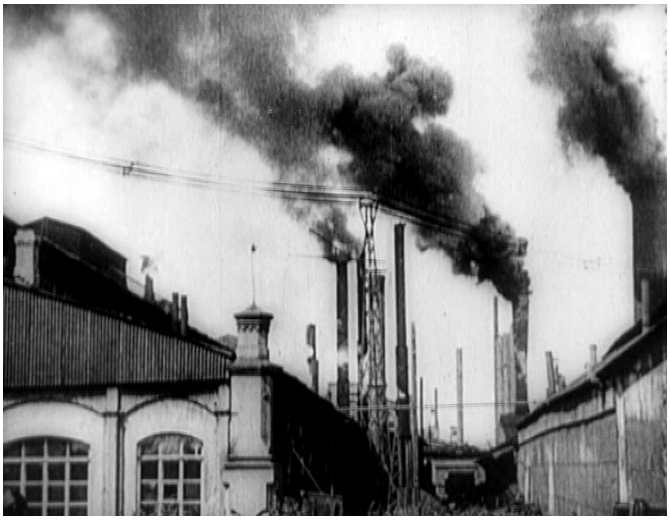
Imperialist decadence vs. Soviet fortitude

A Sixth Part of the World (Dziga Vertov, 1926). DVD: Edition Filmmuseum (Austria).



More than propaganda

Top four: *A Sixth Part of the World* (Dziga Vertov, 1926). DVD: Edition Filmmuseum (Austria). Bottom two: *The Eleventh Year* (Dziga Vertov, 1928). DVD: Edition Filmmuseum (Austria).

involve fancy hats, stuffed animals, and dancing at one extreme, but at the other lies exploitation, racism, and cruelty. One of the most important juxtapositions comes when a scene of a black workers grinding grain is followed by footage of a minstrel show with the interspersed titles: "black people . . . existing for amusement as . . . 'chocolate kids'." Vertov's message is clear—although there are many smiles in the first few frames, none of them are true: the rich may smile because they're better off than their neighbors, the slaves may smile because it's better than crying, and the minstrels may smile, well, because they have to—but none of these expressions of happiness are remotely authentic. "Convulsions" reads one intertitle, as faux-tribal dancers step up their pace, jazz bands play, and a woman smokes. The capitalism of the 1920s may well be frenetic, exciting, and dynamic but it is also, according to Vertov's script, "on the brink of historical downfall." History would bear him out on this point, at least.

After twelve minutes or so, *A Sixth Part of the World* abruptly shifts register, turning to the "you" of the Soviet population, the film's main addressee: "you bathing sheep in the waves of the sea . . . and you bathing sheep in the stream." What follows is a poetic, fast-moving but reflective mix of newsreel, found footage, and Vertov's own documentary footage, a celebration of what the director sees as the true unity and perhaps true happiness of the Soviet people in contrast to their capitalist counterparts (Vertov is an expert at capturing authentic smiling and laughter). A genuine sense of the extraordinary diversity of the USSR is conveyed in little over an hour, always tied together by invocation of the unifying energy of the communist project as a whole. The final intertitle sums up the idea of totality: "we build in our country a complete socialist society."

This sense of a journey, a rapid cross-cutting across vast swaths of often inhospitable land creates a glorious kind of cinematic geography, and a profound sense of the space that the flat screen can only rarely conjure. As Oksana Sarkisova puts it in "Across One Sixth of the World: Dziga Vertov, Travel Cinema, and Soviet Patriotism" (*October*, summer 2007): "His cinematographic journeys transported viewers to the most remote as well as to the most advanced sites of the Soviet universe, creating a heterogeneous cine-world stretching from the desert to the icy tundra and featuring customs, costumes, and cultural practices unfamiliar to most of his audience." Unsurprisingly, however, it is in the rather more typically "Vertovian" treatment of cities and industry that we find the kind of innovative, powerful techniques—split screens, haunting superimposition, tracking shots, and complex compositions—that would be perfected in *Man With a Movie Camera*.

Vertov's depiction of Soviet economics is an intriguing exercise in argumentation, as part of his remit is to skillfully depict the complicated ties with the west that formed part of Lenin's loosening of strict state planning. While it is perhaps surprising to see boxes baring the legend "Ford" boxed up for export, and dead Soviet animals displayed in footage from the decadent west, there is an argument of sorts for this trade: natural goods are exchanged for machines that will make other machines, thus in the long term allowing the USSR to do without dependency on capitalism for anything: "We want to produce not only tractors but also the machines needed to produce tractors." There is an intriguing sequence that presents the idea that this mixed economic program is the "cure" for a certain notion of patriarchy and the religious oppression of women that still permeates remoter parts of the USSR ("here and there there are still women with veiled faces"), an argument made now by those keen to divest Muslim countries of their "backwardness," or at least use a superficial kind of feminism in the misplaced defence of a destructive foreign policy. Vertov's secularism, though, is played out in the name of a genuinely egalitarian (if rather hard-working) vision of humanity. Vertov's presentation of the cultural diversity of the USSR in *A Sixth Part of the World* strives to unite the audience, who are both its subject and its intended recipient: cinema as social inclusion. This land is your land: your oil, your cotton, your flax, your machines. There may be those who still worship *Menkva* (spirit beings believed in by Siberian shamans) but "slowly the old is disappearing" in favor of the new. *A Sixth Part of the World* is a reminder that Vertov is a master of capturing nature, particularly rough seas (black or otherwise), animals (reindeer remind us of just how cold the country is) and flora, even if the latter are being hacked at or eaten. Shots of icebreaker boats named *Lenin* ploughing through arctic waters provide Vertov with a metaphor (appropriate to the climate) that connects these images of nature to questions of society: communism too breaks through ossified human tra-

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Atom Egoyan interview

ABOUT THE JOURNAL

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ditions. As a geographical and political project, symphonic in scope and method, the remarkable experimentalism of *A Sixth Part of the World* puts to shame the often ponderous environmental and geological films that came later, such as *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983), which tend to oppose technology and nature, with humanity operating as the damaging mediator.

The difficult historical relation between people, nature, and technology is relevant also to a strange story about the second feature contained on the disc, *The Eleventh Year* (1928). The film is another attempt to present an optimistic and global celebration of the achievements and glories of the USSR in the eleventh year of the revolution, notably innovations in hydroelectricity, irrigation, and electrification (one is instantly put in mind of Lenin's famous claim that "communism is the government by the Soviets plus the electrification of the whole land"). *The Eleventh Year* is a paean to heavy industry. Unlike *A Sixth Part of the World*, *The Eleventh Year* uses very few intertitles, relying on the sheer force of its images of mines, power plants, and dams to do most of the work. Man has successfully brought nature to heel, as the "giant" workers atop lumps of rock indicate.

Before they were screened outside Russia, extracts from this mainly Ukrainian-shot film were inserted in a rather different, German compilation by the Austrian communist A. V. Blum (working with Leo Lania), who had somehow managed to come across what Blum described as "partly unpublished Ukrainian films." Their short film, *In the Shadow of the Machine* (1928), thoughtfully included on the second DVD of this edition, presents an explicit critique of the very technology that Vertov sought to praise. Thus Blum's film, a blend of the final reel of *The Eleventh Year* and footage from Dovzhenko (among others), stresses the dark side of industrialization—hands mangled in workplace accidents, train wrecks, coffins—and connects to a particularly German concern with the negative effects of technology stretching from the Romantics to Heidegger, Horkheimer, and Adorno in the twentieth century. (The idea that man might ultimately become the instrument of the machine is not a million miles away from certain elements of contemporary environmentalism, of course, which makes the message of Blum's film rather more acceptable in today's ideological climate than Vertov's.) *The Eleventh Year* was first screened in Germany in 1929, after *In the Shadow of the Machine*, and the misleading sequence of events caused a minor scandal. Vertov was accused of plagiarism—whereas, of course, it was Blum who had failed to acknowledge his debt to his Soviet counterpart. Blum and Vertov exchanged a series of letters in the German press that year, with Vertov vehemently defending the provenance of the footage as coming from the by then well-established Kino-Eye group, with Blum sheepishly arguing that German films weren't allowed to reference sources if footage came from outside the country.

Inadvertently, though, Blum performed a service to the history of cinema, as an incredibly detailed documentary included in this release demonstrates: some scenes from *The Eleventh Year* lost to age and decay actually appear in *In the Shadow of the Machine*. A shot-by-shot analysis by scientists at the Vienna Institute of Technology reveals not simply the extent of Blum's borrowing, but also what appears lost from Vertov's original. At the end of *In the Shadow of the Machine*, there are an additional thirty-nine rapidly edited shots which include not only repeated images from *The Eleventh Year*, but also images of a railway cart rattling back and forth, which seems to be footage shot by Vertov for *Man with a Movie Camera*. Digitalization of these images reveals that these shots are extremely close to scenes in *Man with a Movie Camera*, which was made during the same period. The question posed by Blum's accidental preservation of Vertov's footage is whether the latter originally intended to use this material in the earlier film: does Blum's use of the footage indicate that this final scene was the original finale of *The Eleventh Year*? The shot-by-shot comparison included in the documentary as the final part of the second DVD is extremely intriguing on this perhaps unanswerable point.

Both Vertov films are accompanied by original soundtracks by Michael Nyman, which will presumably go some way to popularizing the release. John MacKay notes in "Film Energy: Process and Metanarrative in Dziga Vertov's *The Eleventh Year* (1928)" (*October*, summer 2000), that the original "musical scenario" for *The Eleventh Year* included, "such stirring material as the *Flying Dutchman* and *Rienzi* overtures," but Nyman's compositions, although stirring in their own way, are often rather too soupy for Vertov's stark visual juxtapositions; Nyman captures something of the repetition of the machines, for example, but his overly layered orchestral pieces lack the requisite machinic dynamism, somewhat smothering the images, particularly in *A Sixth Part of the World*. Nevertheless, this minor criticism aside, this comprehensive, expertly compiled edition does two of Vertov's most obscure, unseen, and thrilling films exactly the justice they deserve.

NINA POWER is a *Film Quarterly* Writer-at-Large and the author of *One Dimensional Woman* (Zero Books, 2009).

DVD DATA *Šestaja čast' mira Odinnadcatyj* [*A Sixth Part of the World*]. Director: Dziga Vertov, 1926. Publisher: Edition Filmmuseum. €31.99, 2 discs.

UN-DIMENSIONAL MAN: *DILLINGER IS DEAD*

Marco Ferreri, who died in 1997, is a neglected director these days, lost in the shadow of bigger-name iconoclasts like Buñuel and Godard. He began as a producer, directed his first films in Spain, and returned to his native Italy where he turned out dark, idiosyncratic satires, loosely in the tradition of *commedia all'italiana*, that skewered bourgeois morality and sexual relations. *Dillinger Is Dead* (*Dillinger è morto*, 1969) was his tenth film and its release in a Criterion edition comes as a strange, difficult, and gleefully misanthropic gift from the past. The film, here in a sharp digital transfer, was until now hard to find and hence talked about in ways that only bolstered its distinctly cultish air: *there's this film where a gas-mask designer comes home, cooks dinner, finds John Dillinger's gun* . . . It's a turning point in Ferreri's work, a declaration of a break with forms and social conventions of the past. What was in his previous films a tendency toward high-art irrationality in the name of anti-capitalist critique became in *Dillinger Is Dead* a full-blown commitment. The reissue lets us look back at this break, now that we know that the post-'68 world didn't sustain the commitment.

Given the relative absence of available information about, or analysis of, Ferreri for English speakers, the extras included on this disc are particularly welcome. Italian film historian Adriano Aprà sketches the trajectory of Ferreri's career, with emphasis on the preceding films, and elaborates *Dillinger Is Dead*'s "fundamental importance" to its period, capturing the issues of the time without "spelling them out." Lead actor Michel Piccoli talks about his working relationship with, and love for, Ferreri. Excerpts from a French television show, *Le Cercle de minuit*, include Ferreri speaking movingly about the cinema as an increasingly outmoded communal meeting place together with a round table involving Bernardo Bertolucci, Francesco Rosi, and Aldo Tassone, filmed days after Ferreri died. In the booklet, an essay by Michael Joshua Rowin emphasizes questions of gender politics. Finally, two interviews with Ferreri reveal him to be razor-sharp and caustic.

A decent place to start making sense of *Dillinger Is Dead* is with the Criterion blurb, which describes the film as, "inscrutable," "idiosyncratic," a "surreal political missive about social malaise," and "illogical and grandly existential." Add to that the unspoken word that hovers over the whole enterprise: "ennui," that ultimate term for a distinctly western European vision of what's wrong with being rich. This is very much an "art film." It's radical, it doesn't make much sense, and "mainstream" audiences would hypothetically find little reason to sit through it. Watching the film now, forty-one years later, reveals that however much has changed, more has stayed the same, appropriately for Ferreri's vision of a world perpetually on the skids, never quite crashing or even changing direction.

As for the inscrutable plot, it goes like this. Glauco (Piccoli), an Italian gas-mask designer, listens to a co-worker (Gigi Lavagetto) read a treatise on contemporary alienation that references Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*. He drives home, greets his wife (Anita Pallenberg), throws away dinner left at the table for him, and cooks a meal for himself instead. He finds a gun with some connection to John Dillinger (it's wrapped in newspaper detailing Dillinger's death and, as Glauco unwraps it, the film interrupts its narrative flow with a jumpy sequence of old newsreel footage about Dillinger). He watches his maid (Annie Girardot) dance naked, refurbishes and paints the gun red with white polka dots. He watches home movies distractedly, frolics in front of the image, and generally goofs around. He records his wife's breath as she sleeps, teases her with a toy snake, pours honey down his maid's back at her request, and finds bullets. He shoots his still-sleeping wife, drives to the sea, swims to a Tahiti-bound sailboat whose cook has recently died, and takes a job as the new cook. As the ship sails, a red filter colors the frame. It intensifies, reducing the images to outlines, until only a red sun is left.

The emptiness of the plot is the narrative equivalent to the sense of alienation that pervades what can be called "ruling-class boredom films" (Buñuel's *Belle du Jour*, Godard's *Contempt*, Antonioni's *L'avventura*), in which the endless drift of the disenchanted rich's free time is conveyed in aimless, vague narratives. In a way, what happens in *Dillinger Is Dead* doesn't matter. Certainly the movie (which has no flashbacks) gives us almost nothing to explain why it happens. The closest we get to causality or motivation are cryptic recollections: speechless home movies, themselves quite arty, and a brief tape-recording of his wife yelling at Glauco to "cut it out with that damned camera" and that "you don't understand anything and never have," an accusation that seems to double back on the film and its viewers. The minimal dialogue and paucity of emotion further reduce our scope of understanding

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Performing alienation
Dillinger Is Dead. © Lanterna Editrice s.r.l. DVD: Criterion Collection.

to the actions we witness. Glauco idiotically distracts himself, as if waiting for something worthwhile to occur. Consumption and habitual leisure are noticeable enough here, but Ferreri's film isn't especially about excess consumption. (If anything, it's about waste—food to be prepared and thrown away, empty time to be filled with low-level perversion and sleeping pills.) The interior of the couple's home is relatively modest. Instead of whitewashed walls that offset ostentatiously lonely sculptures, some cold site of anomie, the interior is busy and cluttered, lived-in. While creating a recognizable mood of alienation, Ferreri retains the texture of the everyday.

It is a lethargic film, never in a hurry. The camera paces the house but rarely lets Glauco out of its sight and doesn't leave the premises until he does. It lingers, at times framing closer on Pallenberg's sleepy face, the painted gun, or other objects, but mostly holding steady at midrange as Glauco wanders in and out of frame. There's minimal cutting and, more notably, few discernible jumps in narrative time. Ninety-five minutes is awfully fast to go from returning home at night to exiting at dawn, but barring the explicit ellipsis in which he and the maid may or may not do more than eat honey together, we're right there with him, killing time, so it never

feels fast. Although nothing much happens for a long time in *Dillinger Is Dead*, with its long spans of watching a man watching movies of himself, it is enough to change everything. Come the morning, nothing will be the same again.

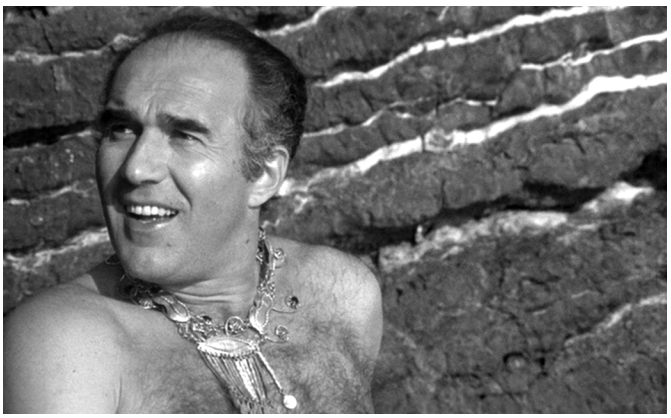
Or will it? Is this a revolutionary film, as the opening reference to Marcuse might suggest? Glauco's co-worker is writing his own treatise on alienated life, incorporating a metaphor borrowed from his own job: the condition of man is analogous to wearing a gas mask in a chamber full of deadly gas. "One cannot reflect on this mythical one-dimensional man without analyzing all the characteristics of our industrial society," he offers, and the stifling condition of knowing that you have to wear a mask leads to the "transfer of the outside world to the interior." We're therefore prepped to take this as the basic perspective of the film to follow, with *One-Dimensional Man* as a framework. In that book, it is argued that consumerist false needs and the apparent decline of proletariat antagonism have produced a "one-dimensional" world in which real oppositions, and the possibility of dialectical movement, cease to obtain. Counter to this, Marcuse proposed that we need negative thinking and a collective "great refusal" of any and all forms of domination.

Looked at one way, *Dillinger Is Dead* does offer a subtle, sly engagement with this critique of contemporary alienation, as if to translate between the state of society and the state of Glauco's restless, bored psyche. In particular, there's the way he plays with the projected home movies: not only watching them but also joking around with them, rearranging the screen into different shapes, becoming part of the screen himself. It's hard not to discern a commentary on "mediated" life here: Glauco ignores his flesh-and-blood wife upstairs in favor of looking at movies of her and listening to recordings of their past fights. The injunction to break out of fragmented, media-ruled lives reverberates in these scenes. Having said that, though, in *Dillinger Is Dead* we watch our "one-dimensional man" work through senseless and hands-on versions of revolt: act like you're part of a two-dimensional projected image and "negate" your bourgeois domesticity by killing your wife. Something's a bit off.

This isn't a question of a banal absurdism, in which situations and actions don't correspond. There are plenty of mismatches and pointed contrasts: the television plays footage of heroic masculine athletes while Glauco cooks in an apron, the radio blares songs about yearning for freedom as he placidly rubs olive oil on the gun. But the real weirdness is to be found in the way the film suggests the deep complicity of all present in achieving these dissonant effects. Many of the songs we hear are not, in fact, broadcast but selected by Glauco, as are the films. The maid happens to have honey waiting in the room for the seduction game. We can't shake the feeling that things might always happen like this here: every night a performance of alienated behavior, the participants enjoying making it seem credibly accidental. Above all, this is a film about *playacting*. The wife makes faces at the goldfish and flashes a light at the mirror, the maid flirts and dances and kisses her poster. And Glauco never stops cavorting—dangling the snake, mugging in the mirror, posing shirtless with the gun. At one especially reflexive moment, he projects a film of hands dancing across a black background while, barely distracted, his own hands entertain themselves filing the gun into working order.

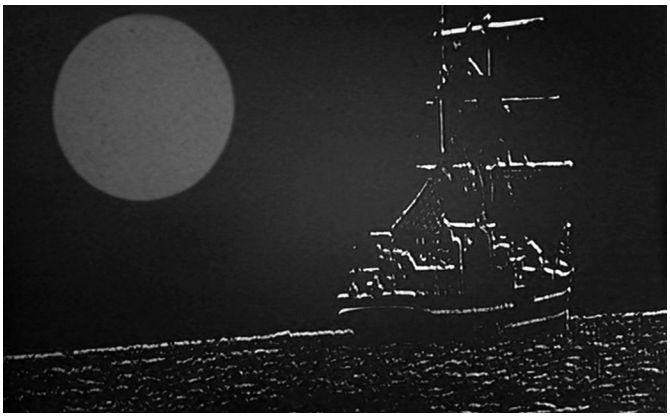
Piccoli said of this "violent and dangerous" film that it "was shot in 1969, after the revolution, and it's a question of the desperation of man who has 'made it' who no longer knows where to go" (*Cahiers du Cinéma*, December 2005). Indeed, Glauco does seem like one who made it through the revolution unscathed, morose about being left out of the fun, and convinced that he's still expected to "play it straight." After he kills his wife, he pulls out ornate, gaudy gold necklaces from their dresser and puts them on, a ridiculous, hippie-inflected midlife crisis. Along with prior hints in the film (such as his unnoticed declaration during his co-worker's treatise that "I don't want to design these [gas masks] anymore"), it's a way of saying: *yeah, I'll try this new thing out, leave it behind, and stop being such a square*. But the bad taste in our mouths isn't the fact that he killed for "freedom," even if it's a pathological choice or false way out. It's that Glauco was never much of a square: he's been an odd, goofing clown all along. His alternately combative, comatose, and childless marriage isn't holding him down from leaving the house to start from scratch. That's the horror of the murder—it's flagrantly unnecessary. Given the two deaths (wife and cook) that occasion one man's flight, the only certainty is that the equation is all wrong and that the rules of the game are missing, unknown but nervously felt by all.

And so the ending of *Dillinger Is Dead* allows no real unleashing of energies. Perhaps the brief frisson of playing sailor . . . but the red soon descends and, with it, a crippling anxiety of which the bourgeois-specific ennui was just a minor, prescient shadow. As Ferreri puts it in a 1979 *Cinemasessenta* interview included in the booklet, "the origin of this anxiety is nothing more than the specious hope for a world that no longer exists. We are the orphan children of the society that gave us birth." How fitting, then, that he followed *Dillinger Is Dead* with the end of birth: *The Seed of Man* (1969) gives us not only a post-apocalyptic scenario, but global infertility and one fertile woman who justifiably refuses to bring a child into the world. As Rowin notes in his essay, *Dillinger Is Dead*



Work for idle hands?

Dillinger Is Dead. © Lanterna Editrice s.r.l. DVD: Criterion Collection.



Red sky at morning
Dillinger Is Dead. © Lanterna Editrice s.r.l. DVD: Criterion Collection.

has the character of a break in Ferreri's output (and we should add that it reproduces a violent break in its story). Yet what *The Seed of Man* and the other films Ferreri directed in the 1970s show is that *Dillinger*'s break didn't take. They're appropriately obsessed with the question of what should die yet cannot, as the valueless drift of the present only deepens. In *Don't Touch the White Woman* (1973), the bloody American past of General Custer is transposed onto contemporary Paris. In *La Grande Bouffe* (1973), four rich men gorge themselves literally to death over a weekend, trying to consume their way out of the consumption system. And *Bye-Bye Monkey* (1978)? A giant rotting dead ape and an underground teeming with rats.

Speaking of the ending of *Dillinger Is Dead* (and the general state of affairs), Ferreri argued, "We have already moved imperceptibly into an 'elsewhere.' That is, inside a reality that merely survives itself or that is already obsolete." This groundless motion is the historical juncture of the film: unmoored, bored, and in severe crisis. It drifts, not into new territories opened by the libidinal energies no longer contained by traditional values, but just deeper into its own purposeless survival. Watching the film now, we can't but be struck by the correspondence to our own time of crisis, these days when a global order is simultaneously coming undone and standing its ground obstinately.

Doubling back on Marcuse, the proper figure here is the *un*-dimensional man: a single point, a *dot*, a surface marker with no depth. It may move, alone or in tandem with others, but it can't determine any direction, whether it really flees to other sites or if it digs back into that persistence of waiting and biding time. One dimension is one too many: it can still inscribe a line and its appearance of directed, certain movement. The dot, conversely, is the un-dimensional point, ornament of the flat and static. This marks Glauco's whole realm, from its projection screens to its Pop Art. Having shot his wife, he stares blankly at a tapestry hanging on the wall, the camera pulled close on a surface with nothing behind it. And, at the center of the film, the white dots on the red gun. The gun is used to commit a murder which is itself an action without an orientation, a plot decoration in a film that has flattened everything down to a series of points that don't connect. It's a flatness so pervasive it paints the film's end red, crushing details beneath the hue until only the sun remains, a superficial circle of red on red.

Is there, as Glauco must have wondered, anything useful to be done in the flattened world of *Dillinger Is Dead*, and by extension elsewhere? Perhaps Ferreri lets us sense a gap between the forces of history and the hollow, patterned world of surfaces, where there's room to work or to play—or to try to understand the difference between the two. On one hand, everything is your own design: you can choose what songs to hear, "let yourself" drift from dinner to murder. On the other, everything is designed and fits your desires too well to be accidental: gun, bullets, boat, dead cook are all there, waiting, right on time. And this is the thing with alienation: it keeps giving you exactly what you want, when you want, an uncanny correspondence of internal urges and external things, joined in that total flatness of pattern. If there's a necessity to escape, it's just the urge to escape these objects always one step ahead of you. So why not just play with these objects, in spite of, or along with, the malaise, the existential anxiety, even the muffled murder? Tellingly, Ferreri criticized "difficult" films, like his own, for the fact that they require work: who wants to come home and work for two more hours watching a difficult movie? Yet so much play is already involved in *Dillinger Is Dead*'s work—Glauco's teasing and joking and his busy, able hands performing trivial, non-economic tasks. In a purposeless, obsolescent present, he neither plays by the rules nor breaks them: he simply plays, distracted, as if to insist on the distinction from anything that might resemble work.

So is this duration of play before its violent end somehow hopeful? Hell no. It's just un-dimensional man, clowning with a loaded gun.

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DVD DATA: *Dillinger Is Dead*. Director: Marco Ferreri. © 1969 Lanterna Editrice s.r.l. Under exclusive license from Roissy Films. Publisher: Criterion Collection. $29.95, 1 disc.

DAVID STERRITT

Cléo de 5 à 7 by Steven Ungar
8½ by D. A. Miller

The history of cinema books is littered with series that didn't last. My shelves hold decades-old specimens of the Cinema One series from Viking Press, the Focus on Film series from Prentice-Hall, and the Filmguide series from Indiana University Press, among others, all less long-lived than they should have been. A happier fate has attended the string of small-format books that the British Film Institute started producing almost twenty years ago. Now comprising some 130 titles, the product line has undergone two significant changes in recent times. What were originally two parallel series, BFI Film Classics and BFI Modern Classics, have been consolidated into a single imprint under the BFI Film Classics name, eliminating a needless borderline between pictures made before and after 1970. And the books themselves have gotten longer, presenting more extensive and well-illustrated treatments. They tend to be less pithy, but they've gained in capacity and scope.

When it comes to actual reading, of course, the overall value of the series is less important than the quality of the book under one's nose. In this case the categories overlap, because BFI Film Classics all use the same template: each discusses a single "classic" of world cinema, taking account of production and reception as well as content and style, and the interpretive chapters usually analyze the film in sequence, reading it from beginning to end. Variations on the pattern have occurred—a few volumes deal with trilogies instead of individual films, for instance—but general adherence to these guidelines has produced an admirable collection with a clear, consistent mission.

The latest entries continue to uphold the standard. *Cléo de 5 à 7*, a well-written study of Agnès Varda's second feature by Steven Ungar, supplements close analysis with extended discussions of Varda's background—her experience as a photographer, her earliest films—and the movie's mixed reception. Better still is D. A. Miller's book about the Federico Fellini masterpiece *8½*, which gets off to a shaky start, then finds its balance and soars to amazing heights.

Some critics group Varda with the French New Wave auteurs, but she was closer to Left Bank filmmakers such as Alain Resnais and especially Jacques Demy, whom she married in 1962, the year *Cléo de 5 à 7* (*Cleo from 5 to 7*) premiered. Its title character is a pop singer (Corinne Marchand) who goes about her usual business one afternoon—shopping with a friend, meeting with her lover, consulting with fellow musicians, and the like—while awaiting results from a medical test that may confirm her fear that she has cancer. Walking in a park near the end of day, she begins talking with an affable young soldier who's also feeling dazed and confused, knowing he's about to leave for combat duty in the Algerian war. Although their conversation is light and casual, it's the most authentically human contact Cleo has had since we first saw her, so routine and superficial are the other activities and acquaintances we've observed. Varda then closes the story with a delicate grace note, choosing a simple two-shot of Cleo and her new companion—not cheerful, not fearful, just calm and contented for the moment—as the final image. It's an inspired conclusion.

Cleo from 5 to 7 is sometimes misdescribed as a story told in real time, with two hours of narrative equaling two hours of film. It actually runs ninety minutes, divided into a prologue and thirteen chapters, and its handling of chronology is extremely sophisticated. As she waits for the test results, Ungar points out, Cleo wants both to hasten time, wishing for certainty about her condition, and to slow time, because when the news comes it might be grim. The film reflects this double impulse by playing measured time and subjective time against each other like contrasting waves from a metronome and a violin, as Varda described the effect she was after. Lest these semi-abstract factors reduce the film's realistic ambience, Varda anchors it in Paris geography "with an attention to spatial detail that [is] close to topographic," as Ungar puts it, very much in the spirit of recent New Wave pictures (*The 400 Blows*, *Breathless*) that had opened up a mobility and immediacy almost unprecedented in narrative film. She also invests the urban scene with intermittently glimpsed objects, images, and figures that Cleo's anxious imagination links to the illness and death she dreads (34–35).

Ungar illuminates these and other themes, tropes, and techniques, and offers a nuanced view of Varda's early-1960s feminism, which is manifested more by her subversion of gendered cinematic conventions than by the story's characters and events. The film's division into chapters suits it well for the sequential analysis favored by the BFI series, and Ungar diverges from this when appropriate. My quibbles with the book are minor. It's fine to contrast Varda's quasi-ethnographic style with Hollywood soundstage filming, for example, but comparing her film to Alfred Hitchcock's nonnaturalistic *Marnie* rigs the argument (72–73). And how I wish Ungar had more to say about the sidewalk entertainer

Varda shows, swallowing live frogs for the amusement of shoppers and flaneurs. This has stuck in my craw (so to speak) for decades, and likening it to "medieval Paris violence" (70) is less than enlightening. There is material in Varda's film for many more books to come.

D. A. Miller is a prolific and versatile writer, but at times he has struck me as more interested in tossing ideas around than carefully thinking them through. The beginning of his book on 8½ led me to expect this again. He mourns the disappearance of the film's original cultural context (7–8), as if that weren't the fate of *every* artwork, and he neglects the productive side of this phenomenon, as new audiences in new contexts create new meanings that may surpass the old ones. Nostalgia strikes again when he speaks of Mondrian canvasses grown "cracked and discoloured" (8), making me wonder what ghastly museums he has in mind. Other dubious notions follow.

A few pages in, however, everything changes. Suddenly shifting gears, Miller embarks on a dazzlingly original reading of Fellini's tour de force about a filmmaker (Marcello Mastroianni) who's unable to make a film, and he sustains the excellence to the end of the book. Starting with the title 8½ as pictured in the movie's logo, he identifies it as a portent of the "monstrous hybrid" (11) constituted by Federico Fellini, the director of the film, and Guido Anselmi, the director *in* the film, whom Miller calls FF and GA, respectively. They are semi-conjoined doppelgängers whose mirror-image relationship is bodied forth by the two circles in the title's 8, and by the ovals in the centers of those circles, and by the infinity sign (or Möbius strip) that the larger circles form, and by the ½ alongside them, which foregrounds the ambiguity between 1 and 2 implied by the double-circled figure 8 . . . and on Miller goes, wittily, inventively, ingeniously.

Is this mise-en-abyme an exercise in absurdity? Yes, but a brilliant and deliberate one; as Miller notes, the film's original title was "A Fine Confusion" (10). I will add that absurdism (going strong in the early 1960s, courtesy of Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and others) is writ even larger in the uproariously useless spaceship gantry that GA has built for his production, which is still an amorphous mess in his frozen imagination. Some images and sequences in 8½—the opening scene, for example, where GA finds himself momentarily airborne over a traffic jam—are geared to arthouse audiences, Miller observes, inviting cinephiles to parse their inner meanings. But its most exhilarating elements, such as the logo and the freewheeling shots of the spa where GA stays, have an effervescent energy that seems to be "doing a lot of nothing, and doing it as zealously as possible," evidently bent on "depriving us, if not of our senses, of our sense" (83). Absurdist cinema has never been better described.

Absurdity also informs GA's most revealing statement: "I have nothing to say . . . but I want to say it anyway." Finding this a rhetorical keystone of the film, Miller posits three ways in which "nothing" serves GA well. First, it signals GA's refusal of the artist's "obligation" to make art. He isn't so much in crisis as on strike, embracing vacuity so ferociously that "it amounts to an actual purpose: to blight the culture machine with crazy-making sterility" (36), thus subverting the system that is driving *him* crazy. Second, it affirms the genius's right to bide his time until inspiration grants him the makings of a masterpiece; the "nothing" he cleaves to is "his interim placeholder for *everything*." Third, it plays into GA's neediness, whereby he says he has nothing to say and awaits the reassuring reply, "But of course you do." And of course he does, which makes him an auteur whose status and destiny are anything but empty. What he presents as a blank imagination is, in fact, "the blank he is reserving for totality" (38).

Although he gracefully follows the sequence of the film, Miller pursues his interpretations wherever they lead, supporting them with cinematic, biographical, literary, linguistic, and historical ideas. He is objective about FF's career—no apologias here for the sad decline after 8½—but his love for this film is radiantly clear. And nowhere more so than on page 63, which contains a detail that Miller himself may not realize is there. Describing the film's magnificent finale, when all the once-intimidating characters come marching down the gantry to join GA's boyhood self in celebration, Miller expresses his own powerful feelings about the scene, writing that "the viewer's joy at this sight may be so acute, and his relief so profound, as to bring him to sobs. For if the 'others' are now indifferent to DA, by the same token they are no longer harassing him; his once petrifying social relations have been made spectacularly easy." Note the upper-case letters there. Are they a mere typo? Or a Freudian slip? Or is Miller saying something to us, perhaps even to himself? Whatever the answer, I am sincerely moved by those initials, which place D. A. Miller into the film as Guido Anselmi's phantasmal twin. For one amazing instant, DA and GA are the same. © 2010 David Sterritt.

DAVID STERRITT, chief book critic of *Film Quarterly* and chair of the National Society of Film Critics, is author most recently of *The Honeymooners* (Wayne State University Press, 2009).

BOOK DATA Steven Ungar, *Cléo de 5 à 7*. London: BFI Publishing/Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. $14.95 paper. 119 pages.

D. A. Miller, *8½*. London: BFI Publishing/Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. $14.95 paper. 122 pages.

EDWARD BUSCOMBE

Screen Education: From Film Appreciation to Media Studies by Terry Bolas

It's always an unsettling, if potentially fascinating, experience to read a description of an event or situation of which you have first-hand experience. Terry Bolas's book is an account of the inner workings of the major institutions responsible, between the 1950s and the 90s, for the development of screen education within the British system of formal education. These two bodies were, under its various changes of name, the department of the British Film Institute which was concerned with the formal education system, and the Society for Education in Film and Television, as it eventually became. Working in a sometimes uneasy but always close relationship, the BFI and SEFT began work when screen education could scarcely be said to have existed outside the informal and unfocused efforts of a handful of enthusiasts. By the end of the 1990s screen education in various forms had become entrenched as one of the most popular and successful of humanities subjects in British schools and universities, and much of the theory and practice that had been evolved had spread into the rest of the English-speaking world.

Institutional histories such as this one are rare events. As readers of *Film Quarterly* will be well aware, so-called "*Screen* theory" has been a crucial, some would say *the* crucial, influence on the intellectual development of film studies both in Britain and in the U.S. But although this body of work had its own internal dynamic and logic, the particular form of knowledge which emerged was heavily influenced by ("determined by," as old-style Marxists used to say) the nature of the institutions which produced it, and that is why Bolas has produced an invaluable study.

At this point I should declare an interest. In the 1970s I was closely involved with both of SEFT's influential journals, *Screen* and *Screen Education*, and was also, as a member of SEFT's executive committee, a participant in many of the strategic decisions that were taken concerning the policies which were followed and the deployment of SEFT's personnel and resources. And from 1974 until the mid-90s I was employed in the BFI, initially in the education department. I was thus acutely aware of the forces that were operating upon those of us attempting to promote screen education in the face of not inconsiderable odds.

If I had to pick out one factor above all others that had an effect on the movement, it would be that its decisive period occurred in the wake of the so-called "events" of 1968. It is because most of the key personnel involved at this time were, in one way or another, *soixante-huitards* who believed in the fundamental principle of linking intellectual work to its political effects, that *Screen* and *Screen Education* made such a distinctive contribution. Theories about cinema were not produced for their own sake, but because they would effect a decisive break with established bourgeois thinking. Of course the 1968 connection also meant there was a natural tendency to look across the English Channel for intellectual stimulus. And it also meant there was a profound mistrust of the institutions of the state, including the educational establishment.

One of the things Bolas usefully points out is that SEFT and *Screen* at that time leaned over backward to avoid being sucked into the conformity of the formal education system. At the same time, as Bolas also notes, Paddy Whannel, the influential and inspirational head of education at the BFI during a key period, believed that screen education in primary and secondary schools would only take off if the subject could get itself established in the universities, the only places in which the necessary sustained intellectual work could be carried out. The tension between these two opposing points of view was not resolved until a decade later, when the universities were eventually prised open. There's no doubt that screen education within the academy has been a success story. But perhaps the price that has been paid is some loss of the political cutting edge which was the primary motivation behind the movement in the first place.

For North American readers, Bolas's account may prove just a little too detailed as it traces through the constant shifts of the personnel and internal politics of the twin institutions. He is certainly an assiduous, even "remorseless" researcher (as Toby Miller puts it in his foreword), and sometimes it is hard to see the wood for the trees. This is perhaps not the book for you if all you want is an intellectual history of screen education. But the important themes do emerge. Besides the legacy of 1968, another constant factor was the seemingly intractable conflict of interests and motivations between, on the one hand, those who were committed to the development of rigorously theoretical work, even at the cost of straining alliances with the well-intentioned but less doctrinally rigid, and those whose primary concern was what happened between teacher and student in the classroom.

The project of *Screen* and *Screen Education* was, as Marx memorably put it, not just to understand the world but to change it (the "world" in this case being the world of cinema; changes in the wider world would hopefully follow in due course). Was it successful? The *Screen* project was not, and is not, without its detractors. As Bolas makes clear, there was institutional resistance all the way. To what extent cinema, in both our practice of it and our discourse about it, has actually

changed in the past fifty years are questions which Bolas does not address. Do the people who make films, or at least some of them, have a better understanding of the nature of cinema than they used to? If so, is that in any way the result of *Screen*? Do critics and audiences respond more analytically than they used to? These are elusive questions, but they would make for a very interesting book. © 2010 Edward Buscombe

EDWARD BUSCOMBE, formerly Head of BFI Publishing, is the author of *Cinema Today* (Phaidon, 2003) and *"Injuns!" Native Americans in the Movies* (Reaktion, 2006).

BOOK DATA Terry Bolas, *Screen Education: From Film Appreciation to Media Studies*. Bristol, U.K.: Intellect Books, 2009. $48.00 paper. 408 pages.

RODNEY HILL

On Kubrick by James Naremore

James Naremore's highly readable and engaging *On Kubrick* breaks with most critical studies by contesting the idea that Stanley Kubrick's films are "cold." In order to expand on this proposition Naremore enlists the idea of the modernist grotesque, in which contrasting styles and emotions meet to powerful effect: "If some people regard [Kubrick] as cold, it may be because he seldom allows us the comfort of secure responses. The emotions he elicits are primal but mixed; the fear is charged with humour and the laughter is both liberating and defensive" (40). It is not that there is a lack of emotion, but that it is carefully distanced, "as if volcanic, almost infantile feelings were being observed in a lucid, rational manner," like in Kafka's fiction, creating a sense of dissonance. Naremore gives some clear examples of the grotesque in the performances that Kubrick elicits: Patrick Magee's over-the-top Mr. Alexander in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), Peter Sellers's "wild impersonations" in *Lolita* (1962), and George C. Scott's "comic mugging" in 1964's *Dr. Strangelove* (168), which is typical of a film in which the director sets out to pull "the audience up short, creating laughs that stop in the throat and suspense that suddenly turns silly" (136). The grotesque elements of Kubrick's *oeuvre* indicate a fundamental preoccupation with the ceaseless interplay of the rational and the irrational (or the emotional).

This dualism is at the heart of Stanley Kubrick's most famous (and, for some, most perplexing) film, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). While many viewers and critics have busied themselves trying to figure out what the film means, Kubrick always said that he intended *2001* as a primarily emotional experience rather than an interpretative one. If the film is "about" anything, surely it is hope for the future of the human race rather than anything more specific. The film raises the question of whether humanity will one day need to be saved, but according to Naremore: "The great achievement of *2001* seems to me its ability to keep this question floating in the air, somewhere between a longing for utopia and a deep suspicion of utopia" (153). Nevertheless, Kubrick did anticipate contemporary advances in technology. Naremore adds that, "we are facing the imminent arrival of a computerized 'non-biological intelligence' that will fuse with the human body and engineer something new, strange, and theoretically immortal. Kubrick imagined just such a future [with *2001*]."

Another highlight of Naremore's book is the section on *Lolita*, a film that I have never been able to reconcile fully with Kubrick's other work—until now. Naremore provides a thorough consideration of *Lolita* as adaptation, accompanied by perhaps the finest analysis of that film I have read. He demonstrates that what makes *Lolita* so effective (and affective) is its constant invocation of the grotesque, seen most clearly in the montage sequence as Humbert moves in with Charlotte Haze and her pubescent daughter. After Humbert (gazing lustily at Lolita) tells Charlotte that it was her "cherry pies" that finally convinced him to take a room in her house, we cut from that sexually suggestive joke (one of the film's many hilarious lines) to a shot of the growling monster in *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), which the three of them are watching at a drive-in. This grotesque affective dissonance between comedy and horror occurs repeatedly in *Lolita*, and this is what connects it most strikingly to Kubrick's other films.

Naremore's discussion of *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999)—which he convincingly posits as "Kubrick's most personal project" (226)—is emblematic of his consistent placement of Kubrick's films within wide-ranging cultural and historical contexts. The heavily symbolic source material, *Traumnovelle* by Viennese author Arthur Schnitzler, links the film to the theories of Sigmund Freud (a contemporary of Schnitzler) and with other European artists and thinkers of the period. Naremore further notes a visual debt in *Eyes Wide Shut* to the work of painter Gustav Klimt (another contemporary of Schnitzler). Freud and Jung clearly hold particular relevance, since we know that Kubrick read their essays; but Naremore does not take them for granted. Rather, he carefully explicates these and other models (including theories of masculinity and violence, appropriate to a fuller understanding of 1987's *Full Metal Jacket*), so that scholars and non-academics alike can see how theory informs Kubrick's artistic strategies.

One hesitates to point out the flaws in such a fine book, but there are a few. Occasionally, especially in covering Kubrick's early features, Naremore indulges in lengthy, detailed descriptions of shots and scenes, with no apparent payoff. There are also a few factual errors here and there, as

changed in the past fifty years are questions which Bolas does not address. Do the people who make films, or at least some of them, have a better understanding of the nature of cinema than they used to? If so, is that in any way the result of *Screen*? Do critics and audiences respond more analytically than they used to? These are elusive questions, but they would make for a very interesting book. © 2010 Edward Buscombe

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RODNEY HILL

On Kubrick by James Naremore

James Naremore's highly readable and engaging *On Kubrick* breaks with most critical studies by contesting the idea that Stanley Kubrick's films are "cold." In order to expand on this proposition Naremore enlists the idea of the modernist grotesque, in which contrasting styles and emotions meet to powerful effect: "If some people regard [Kubrick] as cold, it may be because he seldom allows us the comfort of secure responses. The emotions he elicits are primal but mixed; the fear is charged with humour and the laughter is both liberating and defensive" (40). It is not that there is a lack of emotion, but that it is carefully distanced, "as if volcanic, almost infantile feelings were being observed in a lucid, rational manner," like in Kafka's fiction, creating a sense of dissonance. Naremore gives some clear examples of the grotesque in the performances that Kubrick elicits: Patrick Magee's over-the-top Mr. Alexander in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), Peter Sellers's "wild impersonations" in *Lolita* (1962), and George C. Scott's "comic mugging" in 1964's *Dr. Strangelove* (168), which is typical of a film in which the director sets out to pull "the audience up short, creating laughs that stop in the throat and suspense that suddenly turns silly" (136). The grotesque elements of Kubrick's *oeuvre* indicate a fundamental preoccupation with the ceaseless interplay of the rational and the irrational (or the emotional).

This dualism is at the heart of Stanley Kubrick's most famous (and, for some, most perplexing) film, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). While many viewers and critics have busied themselves trying to figure out what the film means, Kubrick always said that he intended *2001* as a primarily emotional experience rather than an interpretative one. If the film is "about" anything, surely it is hope for the future of the human race rather than anything more specific. The film raises the question of whether humanity will one day need to be saved, but according to Naremore: "The great achievement of *2001* seems to me its ability to keep this question floating in the air, somewhere between a longing for utopia and a deep suspicion of utopia" (153). Nevertheless, Kubrick did anticipate contemporary advances in technology. Naremore adds that, "we are facing the imminent arrival of a computerized 'non-biological intelligence' that will fuse with the human body and engineer something new, strange, and theoretically immortal. Kubrick imagined just such a future [with *2001*]."

Another highlight of Naremore's book is the section on *Lolita*, a film that I have never been able to reconcile fully with Kubrick's other work—until now. Naremore provides a thorough consideration of *Lolita* as adaptation, accompanied by perhaps the finest analysis of that film I have read. He demonstrates that what makes *Lolita* so effective (and affective) is its constant invocation of the grotesque, seen most clearly in the montage sequence as Humbert moves in with Charlotte Haze and her pubescent daughter. After Humbert (gazing lustily at Lolita) tells Charlotte that it was her "cherry pies" that finally convinced him to take a room in her house, we cut from that sexually suggestive joke (one of the film's many hilarious lines) to a shot of the growling monster in *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), which the three of them are watching at a drive-in. This grotesque affective dissonance between comedy and horror occurs repeatedly in *Lolita*, and this is what connects it most strikingly to Kubrick's other films.

Naremore's discussion of *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999)—which he convincingly posits as "Kubrick's most personal project" (226)—is emblematic of his consistent placement of Kubrick's films within wide-ranging cultural and historical contexts. The heavily symbolic source material, *Traumnovelle* by Viennese author Arthur Schnitzler, links the film to the theories of Sigmund Freud (a contemporary of Schnitzler) and with other European artists and thinkers of the period. Naremore further notes a visual debt in *Eyes Wide Shut* to the work of painter Gustav Klimt (another contemporary of Schnitzler). Freud and Jung clearly hold particular relevance, since we know that Kubrick read their essays; but Naremore does not take them for granted. Rather, he carefully explicates these and other models (including theories of masculinity and violence, appropriate to a fuller understanding of 1987's *Full Metal Jacket*), so that scholars and non-academics alike can see how theory informs Kubrick's artistic strategies.

One hesitates to point out the flaws in such a fine book, but there are a few. Occasionally, especially in covering Kubrick's early features, Naremore indulges in lengthy, detailed descriptions of shots and scenes, with no apparent payoff. There are also a few factual errors here and there, as

when Naremore suggests that for the American release of *Eyes Wide Shut*, Kubrick added CGI hooded figures to the orgy scene in order to block out some of the more graphic nudity and thus obtain an "R" rating, as well as changing some of the music to appease Hindu fundamentalists. In fact, these changes were made after Kubrick's death. Such errors are rare and they do not detract significantly from the book's overarching arguments.

Throughout, one is struck by Naremore's nimble, seemingly effortless prose and analysis; and despite its minor problems, *On Kubrick* is an example of the sort of scholarship that makes the field of film studies richer. This impressive treatise belongs near the top of anyone's shortlist of essential books on Stanley Kubrick. © 2010 Rodney Hill

RODNEY HILL is Assistant Professor of Film at Georgia Gwinnett College and co-author of *The Encyclopedia of Stanley Kubrick: From "Day of the Fight" to "Eyes Wide Shut"* (Checkmark Books, 2002).

BOOK DATA James Naremore, *On Kubrick*. London: BFI Publishing, 2008. $102.00 cloth; $27.50 paper. 312 pages.

DAVID LADERMAN

Off Key: When Film and Music Won't Work Together by Kay Dickinson

Why would anyone be interested in film and music that do *not* work together? Kay Dickinson offers plenty of good reasons in her compelling new book, *Off Key: When Film and Music Won't Work Together*. Scholarly studies of the complex relationship between film and music have become more prominent in recent years, with the appearance of such titles as *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music* (Duke University Press, 2002), *Film Music: Critical Approaches* (Edinburgh University Press, 2001), *Movie Music: The Film Reader* (2003—a Routledge anthology edited by Dickinson), and *Film's Musical Moments* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006). Many of these, whether monograph or anthology, take their cue from Jeff Smith's influential *The Sounds of Commerce: Marketing Popular Film Music* (Columbia University Press, 1998) in their attention to the diverse ways music and film enhance each other.

Thinking outside this box, *Off Key* explores a variety of texts where the post-war, youth culture-inspired synergy between music and film "fail." Dickinson argues that many films typically derided for how they unsuccessfully incorporate music reveal much about the new configurations of labor and leisure resulting from the postmodern merging of the film and music industries. Her project is not unrelated to Jeffrey Sconce's work (which she cites), which examines "paracinema"—"bad" films whose excesses become reflexive ciphers of film culture. *Off Key* extends such an approach in a lively survey that includes *Don't Knock the Rock* and *Shake, Rattle and Rock!* (both 1956), Ken Russell's *Lisztomania* (1975), Dario Argento's *Inferno* (1980), and the *Swept Away* remake (2002). Through Dickinson's eyes and ears, such "flawed" texts become unlikely signifiers of the ideology and economic practices of contemporary mass entertainment.

Dickinson's introduction hooks us with a brief demonstration of how her analysis will work, by considering the roundly lambasted Elvis Presley film, *Harum Scarum* (1965). Here, she teases out some of its "slip-ups and disappointments" (11) as traces of the film and music industries clumsily feeding off each other, groping for win-win profits but producing glaringly inauthentic missteps. These latter, however, inadvertently speak volumes about the nature of the industrial handshake between film and music. Following upon this catchy Elvis opener, Dickinson steps back in order to establish her theoretical perspective and methodology in her next chapter, "The Status and the Potential of Film-Music that 'Doesn't Work.'" Here she elaborates her central analytical concept, the "mismatch." In contrast to any "desire for perfection" in the film–music relationships, the idea of mismatch draws our attention to inappropriate, inconsistent, or unsuccessful conjunctions. Though there are films that deliberately deploy the mismatch (think David Lynch), the mismatches which mainly interest Dickinson are very much "within the system" (20) and, as such, fodder for mass-entertainment consumption.

In a surprising but astute turn, Dickinson goes on to utilize Hegel's theories of the dialectic to illuminate post-Fordism, the socioeconomic context within which she reads the mismatch. Evidently committed to upgrading the critical theory tradition, she thereafter calls upon Marx, Adorno, Derrida, and Bauman to help appreciate the specific instances where film and music fail to synergize (or synergize awkwardly). Critically confronting the mismatch in this vein, for Dickinson, is one way of taking control of new work and leisure conditions. "If we look at 'what doesn't work' from a particular vantage point, its inability to do so can also contain answers about how to realign labor in a more just and egalitarian manner" (15).

Each of *Off Key*'s analytical chapters deploys a distinct theoretical frame to account for the mismatch across a specific body of films bound by genre, director, or other institutional categories. The second chapter, for example, picks up where the Elvis overture leaves off, exploring "the flurry of rock 'n' roll pictures, often starring and largely made for

when Naremore suggests that for the American release of *Eyes Wide Shut*, Kubrick added CGI hooded figures to the orgy scene in order to block out some of the more graphic nudity and thus obtain an "R" rating, as well as changing some of the music to appease Hindu fundamentalists. In fact, these changes were made after Kubrick's death. Such errors are rare and they do not detract significantly from the book's overarching arguments.

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teenagers, huddled mainly around the various school holidays of 1956 and 1957" (43). She takes this discussion of cheesy rock-movie knock-offs in an incisive (if not entirely unexpected) direction, arguing that their repressed African American subtext is crucial to their negotiation of teenage fandom in the emergent suburbia. In another chapter, she uses Eisenstein to reread Ken Russell's musician biopics of the 1970s against the grain of the journalistic contempt that typically greeted them. In a move that might raise the eyebrows of film theory purists, she brings Eisenstein's theories to bear not on the editing of Russell's films, but rather on their reception.

Moving into the Thatcher era, she focuses on the advent of the synthesizer film score and a group of subversive trash films that gained subterranean circulation on video. Vehemently banned by the government, these "video nasties" were notorious for combining "a barrage of unflinchingly violent imagery with often smooth, mellifluous synthesizer scoring that refuses to comment negatively on the visual track" (119). Her final analytical chapter, paying special attention to Mick Jagger's performance in *Freejack* (1992) and Madonna's in *Swept Away* (2002), recasts such dismal attempts at celebrity crossover as a sign of the entertainment industry's need to mystify new labor relations underlying performance and stardom. "The inappropriate cross-over stars make it baldly obvious that they cannot act, which undoes the spell that films purport to weave" (166). In another truly gutsy theoretical gamble, she employs Zygmunt Bauman's articulation of the "practices of semantic conformity" (167) to comprehend, not so much the mismatch embodied by "pop stars who can't act," but rather the manically harsh judgments leveled by film critics against them. For Dickinson, these judgments reveal an embrace of the new commodity value assigned by global markets to flexibility and multitasking. Indeed, for all the wide-ranging theoretical verve Dickinson displays, the most impressive and important feature of *Off Key* is its integration of well-researched economic and political trends into the textual analyses.

After reflexive and candid remarks about her own scholarly labor in writing *Off Key*, Dickinson closes by reiterating the political and ethical need for future "work" on what "does not work"; the need, that is, to see and hear the mismatches—"the amateur, the off-the-wall, the differently skilled" (194)—which arguably point up the limits of globalized corporate entertainment. © 2010 David Laderman

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MARTIN FRADLEY

The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry ed. Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko

Brand Hollywood: Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age by Paul Grainge

Universal Studios' resurrection of *The Mummy*—originally produced for under $200,000 in 1932—as a CGI blockbuster franchise in the late 1990s neatly summarizes the tectonic shifts in the American film industry since the classical period. There is, for a start, just the matter of cost: Stephen Sommers's reimagining of this horror classic as a spectacular fantasy romp had a budget of $80 million and grossed $155 million at the domestic box office. Behind the figures is a story of radical industrial transformation involving, as Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko state in the introduction to *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*: "Conglomeration, diversification, transnationalization of ownership, multiplication of distribution outlets, escalating production budgets, event movie production, exploitation of ancillary markets, the freelance market for creative and craft labor, and the global dispersal of production" (4). The book's contributors set out to make sense of the changed landscape.

The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry is usefully organized into three broad sections: "The Structure of the Industry," "Industry Dynamics," and "International Territories." Tom Schatz begins proceedings with an overview of the industry's reorganization into the commercial behemoth of "Conglomerate Hollywood" (14). Tracing the merger-and-acquisition frenzy of the late 1980s onwards, Schatz carefully outlines the emergence of cross-ownership of film, television, cable, publishing, and other media entertainment interests, and their synergistic integration into "a worldwide entertainment industry with the film studios as the epicentre, and with 'filmed entertainment' as its key commodity" (27). The importance of these shifts is underscored by further essays on no fewer than four of Hollywood's key ancillary markets (the term "ancillary," of course, being something of a misnomer today): television, video/DVD, videogame licensing, and soundtrack albums. The movie has become a multi-purpose commodity. Also in this section, Charles Acland's "Theatrical Exhibition: Accelerated Cinema" discusses "the fractured hegemony of celluloid" (83) as a result of digitalization and the rise of home cinema. Such developments have brought with them a substantial increase in the power of dealmakers (Hollywood's new auteurs, you might say): producers, agents, distributors. In the next section, McDonald even-handedly tackles a similar topic—the role of attorneys, managers, and publicists in today's version of the star system.

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New media bring new opportunities for failure. As Randy Nichols relates in "Video Games: Promises and Challenges of an Emerging Industry," five million unwanted cartridges of a 1984 *E.T.* videogame were consigned to landfill, and another important part of the story concerns Hollywood's increasing reliance on the overseas market (only one in ten theatrical releases recoup their costs at the domestic box office). The subtitle of John Trumpbour's essay says it all: "Export or Die." While many of the contributors to *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry* here regretfully point to the homogenizing effects of globalization, which often successfully override foreign resistance to U.S. entertainment, most nevertheless reach less pessimistic conclusions about both the resilience of home cultures and the mutual benefits of transnational flows and symbolic commodity exchange. Indeed if Hollywood, as various essayists argue, has now become an integral part of the cinema industries in so many territories across the globe, it is no longer a straightforward matter to think of Hollywood cinema as unambiguously belonging to the United States. Perhaps, as McDonald suggests in his own essay, contemporary Hollywood in the era of media conglomerates is simply "too big to be just American" (231). However that may be, one territory remains tantalizingly out of reach. The potential goldmine of China has thus far remained largely impervious to what John A. Lent in "East Asia: For Better or Worse" dubs "the bully tactics of Hollywood" (284).

Initially raised in 1923 as an advertisement for a new housing development in a rapidly expanding Los Angeles, the iconic "HOLLYWOOD" (originally "HOLLYWOODLAND") sign that adorns Mount Lee remains the most instantly recognisable icon of the American film industry. Furthermore, the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce has actually trademarked the sign which, since the 1980s, has been used to successfully brand the city and its entertainment industry—in the process becoming, as Paul Grainge puts it in *Brand Hollywood*, "part of the city's landscape of fantasy, an architectural monument to the history of movie making that at once obscures the fact that film production has largely dispersed from Hollywood to a range of locations and factories around the world" (4).

Grainge carefully locates his discussion of Hollywood's use of commercial signs and logos in relation to broader debates surrounding the relationship between neoliberalism, commodity culture, and the political economy of branding. While he acknowledges Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (2000) and other "brand critique" work, Grainge himself steers clear of anti-capitalist polemic in favor of what he calls "the gestalt of 'total entertainment,'" seeking to analyze what he emphatically terms "the *practice*, *poetics* and *politics* of branding as a multivalent feature of the diversified and franchised entertainment economy in which films circulate" (8).

Through a series of detailed case studies, Grainge repeatedly demonstrates how branding has become central to an industry reliant upon the revenues accrued from ancillary merchandise, franchising, and product placement. Inevitably, there is a lengthy discussion of Disney, which has successfully associated itself with "magic," innocence, and wholesome family values. Grainge also highlights the growing sophistication of product placement in Hollywood productions. Starbucks' collusion in its own negative portrayal in *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (1999) epitomizes the way strategically placed brand images no longer rely on "stealth promotion" but are instead reflexively aimed at a knowing, media-savvy audience: "*Austin Powers* provides an example of the means by which product placement has become profoundly unbothered by any semblance of invisibility" (36). Other key texts in the author's overview are *Chanel No. 5: The Film* (2004) in addition to the more obvious *Star Wars* (1977), *Batman* (1989), and *The Matrix* (1999). The three latter films all kick-started vast multimedia franchises, exemplifying the lucrative potential of ancillary merchandising as well as the immersive pleasures of "total entertainment."

From the studio logos which have appeared at the start of feature films since the classical period through to the way Looney Tunes successfully branded and reinvigorated interest in its back catalogue in *Space Jam* (1996) and *Looney Tunes: Back in Action* (2003), *Brand Hollywood* leaves the reader in no doubt as to the importance and omnipresence of the brand as commodity sign. An intriguing chapter on Dolby sound technologies is particularly instructive in explaining the ways branding strategies are employed to add experiential prestige to theatrical and domestic viewings and the manner in which the familiar Dolby logo makes the sensory affect of the aural *visible* in brand terms. For Grainge, however, branding mania is best illustrated by pre-sold fantasy franchises such as *Harry Potter* (2001–), for which *Variety* editor Peter Bart coined the term "corporate movie" (133) in 2001.

Perhaps inevitably given their shared subject matter and concern with industrial forces and profit margins, some readers may find both *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry* and *Brand Hollywood* a little dry in tone. They are nevertheless lucid, insightful, and valuable books that one finishes with a somewhat heavier heart than when one began. © 2010 Martin Fradley

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LEGER GRINDON

The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy by Celestino Deleyto

Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre by Tamar Jeffers McDonald

The study of film comedy in the 1990s, as represented in books by Andrew Horton, Henry Jenkins, Kristine Brunovska Karnick, Steve Neale, Frank Krutnik, and Kathleen Rowe, emphasized comedians. While not ignoring romantic comedy, scholarship moved from courtship narratives toward clowning, the comic personality, and gags. More recently focus is shifting again. Billy Mernit's screenwriting manual, *Writing the Romantic Comedy* (Harper, 2000), and David Shumway's *Modern Love* (NYU Press, 2003) exercised an influence on the margins of academic film studies, and Kathrina Glitre's *Hollywood Romantic Comedy* (Manchester University Press, 2006) offered a perspective on the classical era grounded in genre cycles and star studies. Now a book by Celestino Deleyto offers an engaging, original perspective.

In 1998 Deleyto edited a collection of essays with Peter William Evans, *Terms of Endearment* (Edinburgh University Press), and he has contributed essays on the genre to *Screen*, *Cinema Journal*, and other periodicals in the last decade. But this latest book is not a collection of his essays, though the continuity of his thought is evident. Rather it fluently stakes out a new and well-organized approach to romantic comedy that is thoroughly versed in the critical literature, well grounded in genre theory, and forges immediate connections to our experience of gender, sexuality, and courtship. Though the book offers a unified argument whose strength grows with each section, one can usefully dip into the volume because each section has its own integrity. It is a shame that *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy* is only available in an expensive cloth edition. I would urge the publisher to produce a paperback edition in order encourage the wider readership this book deserves.

The introduction addresses broad issues of genre theory. Chapter 1, "The Theory of Romantic Comedy," lays out Deleyto's main concepts and refers to well-known films. The remainder of the book applies the concepts to textual analyses of *To Be or Not to Be* (1942), *Kiss Me, Stupid* (1964), *Rear Window* (1954), *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), and *Before Sunset* (2004). If this seems like an odd group upon which to test a theory of romantic comedy, it is intended to be. For Deleyto, the secret life of romantic comedy is found on the margins of the practice. He argues that a genre consists of a series of conventions rather than a body of works. These conventions often arise in a scene, as a motif, or even a fragment in a film that may be dominated by another genre. Furthermore, in the interaction with elements from other genres, the conventions of romantic comedy undergo their most novel developments. As a result, it is often outside the boundaries of the genre that the operations of key practices evolve, only later to be integrated into mainstream works: "it is in the interstices of the genre's frequent crosses with other comic or non-comic genres and with modes and traditions not usually associated with it that the most challenging developments take place" (174–5). For example, Deleyto argues that *Kiss Me, Stupid* mixes satire and romantic comedy until it concludes with an innovative use of comic transformation, in which female desire is fulfilled through an exchange of social roles—Polly masquerades as a wife and Zelda as a prostitute—that allows the two female characters to realize their sexual fantasies. He finds that the film, rather than treating sex as degrading, promotes the imaginary as a healthy means of thwarting repression and embracing the erotic; and he contends that one should look to these "secret" sites to find evocative mediations between the forms of cinema and the shifting culture of intimacy. So he labels his textual analyses "comic negotiations," in which the love triangle, the flirtatious conversation, or the space of romance play off the rhetoric of the thriller, the satire, or an excursion into realism, finding a new voice as a result of the exchange. This is why the book moves beyond genre boundaries and looks for works that participate in the vocabulary of the romantic comedy while bearing the stamp of another genre.

Deleyto argues that romantic comedy essentially involves three key constituents: a narrative about love, gender, and sexual relationships; a space of magical transformation that frees the characters from inhibitions so they can explore their desire; and humor which establishes a benevolent perspective. These fundamentals are antecedent to conventions, such as the dual protagonist or the "meet-cute," which evolve over time as a result of changing social conditions. Deleyto contests the view that romantic comedies require a happy ending and as a result are politically backward because they offer a naive endorsement of "one true love" and "living happily ever after." On the contrary, he notes the wide range of endings at play within the genre and explains that the resolution is flexible: "The genre's central theme is not so much that conventional union [of the heterosexual couple], as the vicissitudes of the emotional and sexual relationships between the characters" (29). He argues persuasively that though works may promote implicit values, genres are not ideologically predetermined. Rather than focusing on the resolution, Deleyto encourages attention to the much larger middle ground of the plot where the discourse of intimacy

unfolds. Perhaps most interestingly, the author argues for the central importance of space in romantic comedy. He goes back to *The Decameron*, Shakespeare, and the medieval carnival to explore the tradition of a magical setting, removed from normal society, which allows for the liberation of the erotic and the formation of a new identity. "The comic space," he writes "allows the spectator to glimpse a 'better world', a world which is not governed by inhibitions and repressions but is instead characterized by a freer, more optimistic expression of love and desire" (36). Humor ensures the benevolent atmosphere in such romantic enclaves. From here the promise of romance takes shape.

Through textual analysis, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy* emphasizes the changes and variation operating in individual works in terms of these three elements and their contributions to the genre's discourse of intimacy. Deleyto's book richly combines a theoretical approach, critical argument, and textual analysis. It downplays a historical perspective and one of the chief pleasures it offers is to shift our attention away from benchmark films that are often studied. However, the author is reluctant to acknowledge that influence radiates from the dominant works as well as from the explorations on the outskirts.

A more historically minded approach is evident in Tamar Jeffers McDonald's *Romantic Comedy*, a useful, clearly written survey designed for the undergraduate student. After an introduction and opening chapter concerned with definitions, most of the book is devoted to the analysis of what are asserted to be four successive subgenres of romantic comedy: screwball (1934–42); sex comedy (1953–65); "radical" romantic comedy (1967–86); and "neo-traditional" romantic comedy (late 1980s–present). The book explores each of these trends in terms of social context, major traits, a case study, and finally a discussion of continuing influence. The discussions provide interesting examples, generalizations, and a solid literature review. In addition to emphasizing historical change in the genre, Jeffers McDonald also points to continuities. "Although the current romantic comedy," for example, "seems to have acknowledged the difficulties of finding true love, it nevertheless continues to endorse the old fantasies" (14). The author understands romantic comedy as arising from traditional practices of courtship, gender relations, and sexual intimacy (filtered through cinematic conventions), such that the genre has an essentially conservative relationship to social values rather than being frivolous entertainment: "The basic ideology the romantic comedy genre supports is the primary importance of the couple" (13).

Though mostly engaging, *Romantic Comedy* is sometimes sketchy. In particular, chapter 1 on the genre's conventions is slight. It outlines three chief characteristics—visual iconography, narrative patterns, and ideology—and then skims over visual iconography in two short paragraphs and offers not more than a page on narrative patterns, with ideology receiving a more substantial treatment. The historical chapters on screwball and the "radical" romantic comedy are the most successful. The treatment of the sex comedy is often insightful, but its emphasis on Doris Day to the exclusion of Marilyn Monroe is puzzling. As with many historical studies, this one peters out after the turn of the century and overlooks significant recent films, such as *Shakespeare in Love* (1999), *High Fidelity* (2000), and *Sideways* (2004), and so fails to explore recent developments in much detail. © 2010 Leger Grindon

LEGER GRINDON is Professor of Film and Media Culture at Middlebury College.

BOOK DATA Celestino Deleyto, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy.* Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2009. $79.00 cloth. 208 pages.

Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre.* London: Wallflower, 2007. $22.00 paper. 144 pages.

ADRIENNE L. MCLEAN

Reframing Screen Performance by Cynthia Baron and Sharon Marie Carnicke

Reframing Screen Performance makes the "simple, straightforward proposal that actors' gestures and expressions are on a par with other filmic elements," and that "to suggest that acting is a component of film goes against accepted ideas about the 'nature' of film and the time-honored notion that live performance is the province of 'true' acting" (1). I know of very few scholars these days who would refuse to take *all* acting in film seriously, or who would argue against the adjacent proposition that acting is "an integral component of film, contributing to audiences' interpretations just as framing, editing, lighting, production, and sound design do." In fact, Baron is the co-editor of a recent anthology on film acting, and she and Carnicke have each contributed essays to some of the numerous collections devoted to the topic that have appeared in the last decade alone. Its hyperbole about film studies' neglect of screen acting aside, the book does provide interesting analyses of specific films and of various frameworks that can be (and in some cases already have been) used to study acting and performance in different historical and cultural contexts.

The first three chapters explore "perspectives on film and acting that have precluded effective analysis of screen performance" (5), including film's difference from theater, the assumption that film captures "natural" behavior, and film theory itself, especially what the authors perceive as an

unfolds. Perhaps most interestingly, the author argues for the central importance of space in romantic comedy. He goes back to *The Decameron*, Shakespeare, and the medieval carnival to explore the tradition of a magical setting, removed from normal society, which allows for the liberation of the erotic and the formation of a new identity. "The comic space," he writes "allows the spectator to glimpse a 'better world', a world which is not governed by inhibitions and repressions but is instead characterized by a freer, more optimistic expression of love and desire" (36). Humor ensures the benevolent atmosphere in such romantic enclaves. From here the promise of romance takes shape.

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incorrect understanding of montage as a structuring feature of audiences' access to and understanding of a film's meaning. There is a good section on the history of actor training in Hollywood, showing that "in the 1930s and 1940s, inside reports about Hollywood highlighted how performers enhance their beauty and develop their bodies," while in the 1950s stories about Method acting "emphasized . . . the cultivation of players' instincts for expressive, natural behavior" (18). The next three chapters use Prague School semiotics "to elucidate the interplay among performance details, social gestures, aesthetic conventions, and nonperformance elements in films from different eras and cultural traditions" (89), including *City Lights* (1931) and film adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* across several decades. In a fascinating comparison, the authors discuss "aesthetic-cultural traditions" underpinning the performances in Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) and John Sturges's Hollywood adaptation *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). The intent of these chapters is to show that "the myriad details of performance are crafted results of aesthetic choices, and that actors' means of expression (their delivery of text, facial expressions, gestures, and movements) differ from film to film" (138), and also that "films are influenced by theatrical traditions in their respective cultures" (158). The final three chapters examine the acting in the films *Smoke* (1995), *Training Day* (1995), and *The Grifters* (1990), employing terms and concepts taken from dramatic elocution, dance, and theater (primarily François Delsarte's theories about gesture and meaning, Rudolf Laban's movement analysis, and Stanislavsky's language of "Active Analysis" and Stella Adler's "script analysis," respectively). An appendix provides a schematic comparison of three film versions of *Romeo and Juliet* (1936, 1968, 1996), and suggests ways to use the case studies that the book provides throughout in a "class or workshop" (239–41). The book is nicely illustrated throughout with frame enlargments.

Reframing Screen Performance argues strenuously for largely uncontroversial points, but the authors seldom argue with themselves. It is one thing to claim that "this book offers evidence that actors' physical and vocal choices can influence audiences' impressions" and that "screen acting is best understood as a full-fledged component of film, no more and no less important than framing, editing, lighting, costuming, sound design, and so on" (232), but certainly some sorts of shots are easier than others to analyze with the methods Baron and Carnicke propose, and conversely there are situations that are difficult to discuss with reference to an actor's "choices." What of CGI, or animation, or body doubles—or of Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca* (1942), brought in for shooting one day and told by director Michael Curtiz to go up on a balcony, look down and to the right, and nod? Much is made in the book of critics' derogatory remarks about Nicole Kidman's false nose in *The Hours* (2002) or Charlize Theron's weight gain for *Monster* (2003), as though actors on the "legitimate" stage were never so criticized as well (Laurence Olivier's makeup in one of his theatrical versions of *Macbeth* was alleged to have appeared onstage well before the actor himself did!). The writers want to replace "the familiar focus on stardom with concentration on actors' observable performance choices" (6), but there is little discussion of bodies and how their age, condition, shape, and color, when rendered in the close and intimate proximity that film is capable of, might communicate in ways that counter or overwhelm any acting choices on display. Although *Reframing Screen Performance* is a useful addition to the analysis of specific films and the screen performances they contain, it undercuts its project unnecessarily by insisting on its own singular status as a serious study of film acting and by failing to address many of the reasonable questions that the analysis itself raises. © 2010 Adrienne L. McLean

ADRIENNE L. MCLEAN is Professor of Film Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas.

BOOK DATA Cynthia Baron and Sharon Marie Carnicke, *Reframing Screen Performance.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008. $75.00 cloth; $26.95 paper. 310 pages.

MARTIN FRADLEY

Childhood and Cinema by Vicky Lebeau
A Family Affair: Cinema Calls Home ed. Murray Pomerance

From Victorian popular culture's preoccupation with the representation of infancy through to contemporary anxieties surrounding the availability of child pornography, Vicky Lebeau's *Childhood and Cinema* offers an ambitious account of cinema's relationship to images of children—and to the recurrent moral panic concerning the corrupting effect of movies. As well as analyzing specific films, this psychoanalytically inflected account interestingly brings into view important questions about the social and symbolic meaning of childhood in the twentieth century and beyond.

The book investigates the relationship between historically specific meanings attached to childhood and the perceived social impact of cinema. As stand-ins for a supposedly infantilized and passive film spectator, Lebeau suggests, on-screen children have been figures that "announce the seductiveness of the moving image [and] its massive influence on the life and mind of culture" (49). Since the 1890s, apprehension surrounding the ascendancy of the moving image has been mapped onto screen representations of childhood,

incorrect understanding of montage as a structuring feature of audiences' access to and understanding of a film's meaning. There is a good section on the history of actor training in Hollywood, showing that "in the 1930s and 1940s, inside reports about Hollywood highlighted how performers enhance their beauty and develop their bodies," while in the 1950s stories about Method acting "emphasized . . . the cultivation of players' instincts for expressive, natural behavior" (18). The next three chapters use Prague School semiotics "to elucidate the interplay among performance details, social gestures, aesthetic conventions, and nonperformance elements in films from different eras and cultural traditions" (89), including *City Lights* (1931) and film adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* across several decades. In a fascinating comparison, the authors discuss "aesthetic-cultural traditions" underpinning the performances in Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) and John Sturges's Hollywood adaptation *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). The intent of these chapters is to show that "the myriad details of performance are crafted results of aesthetic choices, and that actors' means of expression (their delivery of text, facial expressions, gestures, and movements) differ from film to film" (138), and also that "films are influenced by theatrical traditions in their respective cultures" (158). The final three chapters examine the acting in the films *Smoke* (1995), *Training Day* (1995), and *The Grifters* (1990), employing terms and concepts taken from dramatic elocution, dance, and theater (primarily François Delsarte's theories about gesture and meaning, Rudolf Laban's movement analysis, and Stanislavsky's language of "Active Analysis" and Stella Adler's "script analysis," respectively). An appendix provides a schematic comparison of three film versions of *Romeo and Juliet* (1936, 1968, 1996), and suggests ways to use the case studies that the book provides throughout in a "class or workshop" (239–41). The book is nicely illustrated throughout with frame enlargments.

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with the infant in turn becoming a conduit for anxieties about the debilitating enticements of mass culture and the consumerist freedoms of an increasingly permissive society.

This is, of course, a controversial area, especially when it comes to questions of sexuality, or, more pointedly, "the instability and indeterminacy of sexual identity" (94). Lebeau inevitably discusses Kubrick's *Lolita* (1962), arguing that it "continues to act as the paradigm through which to refer to the difficulty of childhood, sexuality and the visual" (112). She also connects the film to Shirley Temple playing "grown-up" in *War Babies*, *Glad Rags to Riches* (both 1932), and *Kid in Hollywood* (1933) and, more recently, the theme of sexual abuse in *Happiness* (2000) and Gregg Araki's mournful *Mysterious Skin* (2004). Where the former works intelligently "to humanize the paedophilic imagination" (122), Lebeau argues that the latter's emotional and political sophistication stem from its "refusal to tell a single story about the relation between childhood and sexuality, the ties between adult sexuality and the sexual traumas of childhood" (129–30).

Like Karen Lury's recent *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears and Fairy Tales* (I. B. Tauris, 2010), *Childhood and Cinema* makes a compelling case for the importance of popular film in the exploration of pre-adult sexuality: "it is a mark of contemporary cinema that it continues to engage with the sexuality and sexual dissidence of children and adolescents" (128). Lebeau's grounding in psychoanalytic theory comes to the fore in the book's final chapter, which deals with images of children in relation to war and atrocity. Films from *Rome Open City* (1945) through to *Schindler's List* (1993) and *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) depict the child "as a figure through which to explore the legacy of war and genocide during the twentieth century" (141). Lebeau emphasizes both that infanticide defines the "inhuman" and that the child ambivalently symbolizes futurity—the arrival of a new and wholly unpredictable world within the present. Especially provocative here is a prolonged discussion of Elim Klimov's harrowing *Come and See* (1985) and its use of a haunting childhood photograph of Adolf Hitler.

Lebeau asks serious questions about our collective cultural appetite for spectacles of pain and suffering, images which "may well make us wonder about the wishes at work in the visual archive of the child in pain and death" (149). Why is there such a collective appetite for salacious news stories about sexual abuse and child pornography? Noting that popular cinema, from *M* (1931) to *The Exorcist* (1973), has historically courted "appalled fascination" (170) with the spectacle of the suffering child, she successfully brings forward complex arguments in a relatively accessible way. *Childhood and Cinema* is sure to prompt much further thought and discussion. It concludes with an especially fascinating speculation. With digital video technology so prevalent, can we expect a child-authored countercinema to emerge, in which a fierce and assertive critical gaze is turned instead on adults?

Murray Pomerance's introduction to *A Family Affair: Cinema Calls Home* opens with a discussion of the iconic *Repas de bébé* (1895). Ever since, the contributors argue, cinema has been preoccupied with the "cultural dream obsession" of the family, especially its mobilization in conservative politics. (Several contributors give prominence to the resurgence in "family values" rhetoric during the George W. Bush administration.) As Marcia Landy puts it: "the family is a battleground for the hearts and minds of Americans, a disciplinary unit in the interests of social and political power" (205). The key assumption underpinning the collection is the link between popular screen melodrama and the nuclear family. For example, Walter Metz offers a useful analysis of the pernicious melodramatic structure of the Western in relation to Kevin Costner's "ideologically vicious" (62) and anti-revisionist *Open Range* (2003). Conversely, Christopher Sharrett's contribution examines the way *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) intelligently mobilizes these selfsame conventions "to portray the impossible features of American bourgeois life" (130).

As ever with anthologies such as this, the collection is something of a mixed bag in terms of quality. While a number of essays in the early sections of the volume sometimes suffer from an unhelpfully sweeping approach, the best work here is found in those contributions which provide either an authoritative overview of their subject or close examinations of specific topics. Of the former, both Yvonne Tasker and Harry M. Benshoff deserve praise for their respective commentaries on the influence of postfeminism and queer cultures in reformulating conceptions of the family unit. Of the latter, meanwhile, Steven Alan Carr's lively essay on Britney Spears's embodiment of "horny abstinence" (142), James Morrison's discussion of the sublimated class anxieties evident in recent "family hostage" movies, and Adrienne L. McLean's contribution on 1950s fan magazines all stand out as particularly original and incisive in their analysis. *A Family Affair* stands alongside Stella Bruzzi's *Bringing Up Daddy: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Postwar Hollywood* (BFI Publishing, 2005) as a pleasingly jargon-free introduction to familial representation in American cinema. © 2010 Martin Fradley

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BOOK DATA Vicky Lebeau, *Childhood and Cinema*. London: Reaktion Books, 2008. $16.00 paper. 224 pages.

Murray Pomerance (ed.), *A Family Affair: Cinema Calls Home*. London: Wallflower Press, 2008. $85.00 cloth; $28.00 paper. 336 pages.

HER FINE SOFT FLESH

The lady behind the counter at the well-known Berkeley bookstore where I bought my copy of David Thomson's *The Moment of "Psycho"* fairly raced to the shelves to get me a copy when I asked her whether it was in stock. She told me that she'd enjoyed the book so much that she'd watched *Psycho* again after reading it. Pleasing though it is that such encounters can still take place, I retained a certain skepticism, and asked my pet *Psycho* trick question: whether she remembered its very last shot. She did—and this might be the most pleasing thing of all. Most people I've asked over the years think that *Psycho* ends with Norman wrapped in a jail blanket, not hurting a fly. But this shot leads into a double dissolve. The first superimposes a death's head—Mrs Bates's—onto Norman's physiognomy; this composite then dissolves into the swamp from which we see (and hear) Marion's car—the car bought for $700 from California Charlie under the watchful eye of the policeman—being cranked up slurpingly and backward, so we see the "ANL" license plate (go figure) first, then the trunk containing Marion's corpse and Cassidy's money.

This—to my mind one of the most satisfying endings in the history of film—can serve to remind us that while 2010 marks *Psycho*'s fiftieth birthday, the film is no period piece. That it still hits home explains the deliberate ambiguity of Thomson's title: "moment" can mean "importance" as well as "time." *Psycho*, as both Thomson and Philip J. Skerry (in *Psycho in the Shower*) are aware, is a watershed film if ever there was one. Thomson points out tellingly that one of *Psycho*'s few real precursors, Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter*, was at the time of its release in 1955, "a disaster, in great part because there was so little tradition of American Gothic or ugly violence and so little attention to abnormal behavior" (16—today, a world where these counted for little takes some imagining). *The Moment of "Psycho"* is dedicated to Greil Marcus; it is as though Marcus's "old, weird America" is not just called to mind by *Psycho*'s "acid-rural poetry" (101), as Thomson calls it, but is also invoked by it.

Psycho was famous all along for having paraded its own originality—if you've got it, flaunt it—inside and outside the purlieus of Hollywood. Hitchcock in life-size cardboard cut-out, pointing at his wrist watch, and intoning that "No one . . . but no one . . . will be admitted to the theater after the start of each performance," was also changing *when* we looked as well as how we looked and what we saw. Thomson is particularly good on the business history of *Psycho*. In 1958 U.S. box-office receipts dropped below the billion-dollar mark they had held to since the early 1940s. Average weekly attendance in 1958 fell to 35 million; it had been 82 million in 1946. Hitchcock had been among the first in Hollywood to capitalize on the main reason for this decline, television, with the *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* series. For all his successes and bankability, the "suits" at Paramount, to whom Hitchcock owed a film, were leery of *Psycho* (bathroom? lavatory? taxidermy?). Paramount was too much the "A" studio for that kind of thing. However, a distinctly "B" studio, Universal, was in 1958 absorbed by MCA, a talent agency, and it was through MCA that the canny Lew Wasserman served as Hitchcock's agent. MCA bought the rights to Robert Bloch's novel for $9,000—in a "blind bid," meaning that Bloch was not informed that Hitchcock was interested in filming his "property" and could thus not hold out for anything more. Hard bargains were to be struck throughout. Marli Renfro, Janet Leigh's stand-in (or is it "body double"?) for the shower scene, was to clear all of $500 for a week's (hard) work.

What Wasserman proposed to the "suits" at Paramount was a deal the likes of which Hollywood had never seen before. "He proposed that *Psycho* would be a Hitchcock picture on which Paramount [would have] only 40 percent of the ownership. Hitch would defer his salary and direct the film free of charge on a budget kept as low as possible. Indeed, Hitch offered to do it like one of his TV shows, without the production values of the Paramount films, without color or big stars. In return, Hitch would own 60 percent of the picture himself . . . to save Paramount from embarrassment, [*Psycho*] would be shot over at Universal on cheaply rented sets" (18). Hitchcock, "as the 60 percent proprietor . . . did not have to bow to [Paramount] in cutting the picture or in adjusting the advertising. It is often said that Orson Welles enjoyed the most generous contract ever in Hollywood, with *Citizen Kane*, in that, providing he stayed on budget, he had freedom of script, casting, and cut. But Hitchcock had all these rights, and when [*Psycho*] made money he had 60 percent of the profits, a detail Welles had never bothered with" (94). We are not talking small change here. *Psycho*'s initial

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gross was $15 million, more than double what *North by Northwest* or *Rear Window* raked in. Hitchcock was rich. People noticed. They were meant to.

They were also bound to notice the irreversible impact of *Psycho* on audiences, and censorship boards, the world over. The Hollywood Academy turned up its nose—its treatment of Hitchcock had long been a disgrace—but the industry the Academy is said to represent did not. As a sensation, *Psycho*'s aftershocks reverberated far beyond the industry. So much so that "there were signs that films might even penetrate the walls of academe. And to the extent that Hitchcock made films that were like theory in demonstration, he was an ideal figure in teaching as well as a new example of the 'auteur.' *Psycho* was a test case in the debate as to whether 'crass' commercial films (the kind the "suits" at Paramount looked down on) could be art" (102).

That the academicization of *Psycho* has not been an unmixed blessing can be seen in the distance that separates David Thomson's book from Philip J. Skerry's, for the two have remarkably little in common. Neither book treats of Charles Sullivan's claim that the scoring of those screeching strings (*wheep wheep*) over the shower murder was not Hitchcock's idea at all, but Bernard Herrmann's (see my review of Sullivan's *Hitchcock's Music* in the fall 2007 issue), though this was suggested tentatively in William Rothman's *Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze*. Nowhere in Skerry's 300-plus pages do we encounter a phrase as good as Thomson's "acid-rural poetry" (101). Thomson's is incomparably the better book. Not a word goes to waste. Skerry's underwhelming book is more for the specialist, even though his various interviews turn up very little that is genuinely original. *Psycho in the Shower* makes inflated claims not about *Psycho* in general but the shower murder in particular. Yet it does not get to the shower sequence until page 219. Even then Skerry's treatment of it is less detailed, if more schematic, than that of Rothman in *Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze*—a book that does not feature in Skerry's bibliography even though it is a major source on *Psycho* (see my review in *American Film*, April 1982). Rothman gives us frame enlargments; Skerry substitutes a table (247–49) which at best complements them.

Skerry is aware of the skepticism in the film industry about academic film jargon, but faced with it he is like Thomas Hobbes's "bird in lime twigs": "the more he struggles, the more belim'd." When he interviewed Janet Leigh she reminded him of the perils of jargon, at which, in Skerry's own words, "I was astonished and amused and a bit defensive because I was sure that she had lumped me within the critical industry she didn't understand . . . I vowed to myself that my book would be different . . . less jargony and abstruse" (3). We all know where the road paved with good intentions leads. It leads Skerry to the following exchange with Leigh. "One could see the shower scene as an inversion of the birth process, with water, blood, nakedness, and a knife. But in this birth, the mother is destroying life rather than giving it." To which the actress replies: "I think that's bullshit. Excuse me. I think that's complete bullshit" (27).

Conventional Janet Leigh may have been—it turns out she was in favor of censorship—but at moments like this one's heart goes out to her. Skerry is not the man to dispense with jargon or with pretentiousness and affectation. "Thus, if we accept the notion of identification, which was first discussed in Aristotle's *Poetics* in the analysis of catharsis, then we can conclude that the killing of Marion creates for the viewer what Ortega y Gassett calls 'existential shipwreck'" is a representative remark (176). (I suspect the "shipwreck" may be other than "existential.") Obsessiveness prevails. Skerry wonders, for example, whether the knife enters Janet Leigh's (or Marli Renfro's) skin—without explaining why this matters. He also pads his book outrageously without having checked the text for errors, which abound, as do needless repetitions. (Are there any copy editors at Continuum?) Careless obsessives, I fear, are the worst obsessives of all.

When in *Psycho* Sam and Lila call on Al Chambers, the sheriff of Fairvale and his wife in the middle of the night, to report the disappearance of Marion and Arbogast, they learn a thing or two. Mrs Chambers caps her husband's pronouncement that "Norman Bates's mother has been dead and buried in Greenlawn Cemetary for the past ten years" by telling Sam and Lila that she, Mrs Chambers, had picked out the dress Mrs Bates was buried in, and that it was periwinkle blue. As Thomson so aptly points out, this is "a reaching out for gentility and prettiness in a world where the blood is black" (82). What he doesn't say is that at this moment Fairvale morphs into the Santa Rosa of *Shadow of a Doubt* (the Newtons' staircase is remarkably similar to that in the Bates house). I venture to suggest that the Santa Rosa of *Shadow of a Doubt* is where Philip J. Skerry—who tells his reader to read his chapters in a certain order, and times each sequence in the shower murder with a stopwatch—really belongs. He would fit right in with Herb and Joe.

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BOOK DATA David Thomson, *The Moment of "Psycho": How Alfred Hitchcock Taught America to Love Murder*. New York, Basic Books, 2009. $22.95 cloth. 192 pages.

Philip J. Skerry, *Psycho in the Shower: The History of Cinema's Most Famous Scene*. New York, Continuum, 2009. $19.95 paper. 316 pages.

ABOUT THE JOURNAL

HISTORY *Film Quarterly* was founded in 1958 by the University of California Press and can thus claim to be the longest-running critical film magazine in the United States. The first issue was volume 12, number 1 because the new publication reincarnated two previous periodicals: *Hollywood Quarterly* (1945–51) and its follow-up, the *Quarterly of Film, Radio, and Television* (1951–57). The founding editor was Ernest Callenbach, who remained at the helm for thirty-three years. Ann Martin suceeded him in 1991 and steered *Film Quarterly* until 2005.

Film Quarterly is best described as a scholarly magazine, blending research and intelligent journalism, aimed at both specialist and general readers. *Film Quarterly* maintains strong ties with academic Film Studies nationwide (and internationally), as well as with other disciplines where film study thrives, but its intellectual agenda is independent.

Those interested in learning more about the evolution of the journal's editorial character can consult the archive of back issues on JSTOR (www.jstor.org). Two historical overviews are also recommended: the introduction by Brian Henderson to *Film Quarterly: Forty Years—An Introduction* (University of California Press, 1999), edited by Henderson and Ann Martin, and "Da Capo" by Ernest Callenbach, an essay published in the fiftieth anniversary issue (fall 2008). "Da Capo" is available online, together with several pieces from every recent issue as well as web exclusives, at www.filmquarterly.org.

In 2007, the layout of *Film Quarterly* was redesigned in order to accommodate shorter forms of writing (alongside reviews and features), notably columns and reports on festivals or urban film scenes. The rationale was summarized in the fall 2007 editorial: "The new formats . . . are meant to enhance *Film Quarterly*'s appeal to people who think seriously about movies, whether they do so inside or outside the academy. The crucial premise is that readability can be increased without compromising intellectual rigor—for surely compact lucidity, and indeed eloquence, are intellectual virtues."

The current, London-based editor works closely with the book review editor, who commissions dozens of reviews each year, and with members of the editorial board—distinguished scholars from several disciplines who help shape the journal's policies and also provide reader reports.

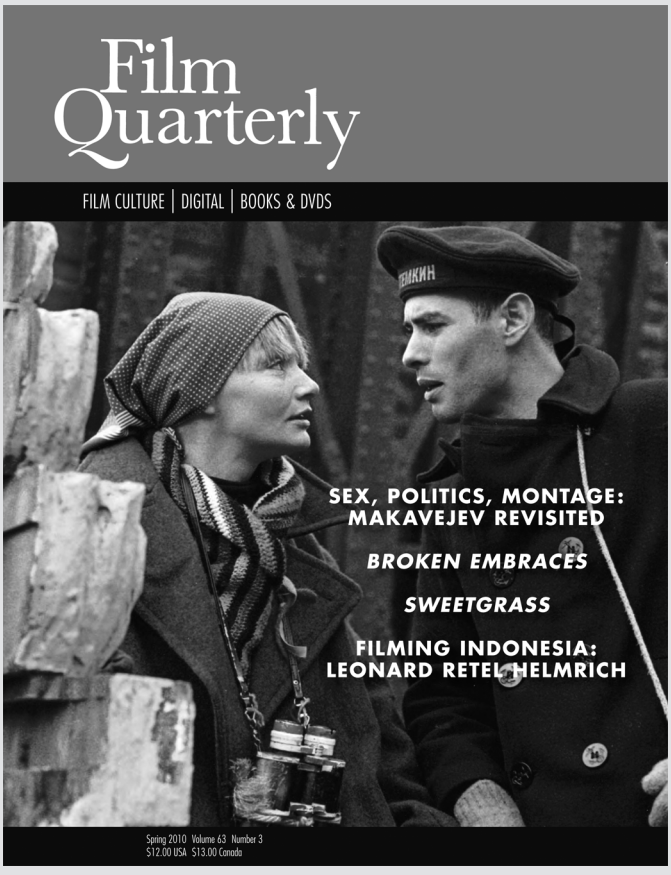
SUBMISSIONS *Film Quarterly* has a core group of contributors—writers-at-large, the chief book critic, columnists, members of the editorial board—and also welcomes submissions from writers, whether newcomers or veteran critics, striving to address a wide audience. Writing skill (or promise) and suitability are what matter, not institutional status or formal qualification.

Submissions are invited in the following categories: career overviews (4000–6000 words); round-up articles encompassing several films or filmmakers—especially articles which cover documentary or digital technology (4000–6000); interviews with filmmakers (2000–5000); reviews of newly released films or DVDs (2500–3500); opinion pieces, especially arguments about the state of film criticism or polemical responses to new films (1500–2500); festival or city reports (2000); book reviews (900). Please consult recent issues for examples of each format.

Inquiries about, and submissions of, book reviews should be addressed directly to Matthew H. Bernstein (mbernst@emory.edu—review copies should be mailed by publishers to: Matthew H. Bernstein, Emory University, Film Studies Department, 109 Rich Building, 1602 Fishburne Drive, Atlanta GA 30322).

All other submissions, pitches, and inquiries should be sent electronically to the editor (fq.submissions@gmail.com). The submitted piece or proposal must not be under consideration by another publication or submitted elsewhere until (in the event that the editor does not take the proposal forward) thirty days after submission to *Film Quarterly*. If the submission is part of a larger project, such as a forthcoming book, this should be stated in the covering remarks.

Film Quarterly has a policy on conflict of interests. When making a submission, prospective authors should mention if any person under discussion is an acquaintance of the author or if any other interest exists.

If accepted by the editor, articles and book reviews are read by two peer reviewers; film reviews and some reports and interviews are also sent out to at least one reader. The identity and institutional affiliation of authors are not disclosed to readers in order to ensure impartiality; reader comments relayed to authors are also anonymous. Once begun, the review process takes no longer than six weeks and is often completed more quickly. If an offer of publication is made, authors can expect further feedback from the editor, who has a hands-on approach.

Rob White (editor)